DEFINING THE ISSUES RELATED TO POWER AND AUTHORITY IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: Power and authority are critical issues to define in relation to the exercise of religious leadership. This topic was the theme for the 2007 annual conference of the Academy of Religious Leadership. Conference participants were asked to do some advanced reading of selected articles on this assigned topic. This short essay is a summary of the presentation made at the beginning of the conference that attempted to focus the key insights from these articles in order to set up the conversation for that event. The selected articles represented various perspectives related to the theme of power and authority in religious leadership. As a result, this essay has inherent limits in being able to adequately address the full range of issues associated with this complex theme. Its purpose is to provide an overview of how power and authority have been theorized within the selected articles in secular and Christian literature.

This essay has four sections. First, a summary of some of the classical approaches to defining power and authority is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the alternative critical perspectives that challenges many of the embedded assumptions within the classical views, and the perspectival understandings of power and authority that have resulted. Third, there is a discussion of how power and authority are being re-conceptualized today. And finally, an overview is provided regarding how biblical and theological perspectives within the Christian tradition help to inform this conversation.

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Classical Views of Power and Authority

The classical views of theorizing about power and authority are largely related to the rise of the discipline of sociology. This discipline took up the subject matter of trying to develop theory about the human social order. Attention was given to issues of roles, norms, structures, and other patterned behavior. Within this analysis and theorizing, the issues of power and authority were addressed. Before turning more specifically to this work, however, it is helpful to draw in some of the historical analysis to understanding power and authority that are provided by Hannah Arendt. She provides in her essay, "What Is Authority," an insightful analysis of the transition that occurred from traditional society to society in the time of the Enlightenment, and spells out the implications this had on understanding power and authority.[1] She theorizes traditional society in terms of authority being embedded within the traditional social order where obedience was expected. But this obedience was also usually based upon some type of persuasion. She notes that it is when force or coercion is used that authority has failed. This is what began to take place within European society when the forces of the Enlightenment began to erode the practices embedded within tradition.

She goes on to document the rise of totalitarian rule, especially bringing critique to the Nazi and Fascist regimes that emerged several decades into the twentieth century. Critical to their power and exercise of authority was their employment of technical forms of administration that enforced compliance to expected behaviors. In reality, they relied on violence to enforce order. Arendt thoroughly critiques the problems she believes resulted from this change in the understanding of authority and the exercise of power.

Max Weber had earlier followed a similar line of theorizing about power and authority. But he did so with

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 462-507.

less of a critical critique of its consequences since his major works were completed before the rise of the regimes that Arendt sought to address. Weber represents the classical school of sociology and provided major contributions to understanding the ways in which power and authority function in the modern world.[2] He theorized three types of authority: (a) rational-legal, (b) traditional, and (c) charismatic. His preference was for the rational-legal approach where roles and positions were clearly defined and where authority was directly tied to these roles and positions. This eliminated the discretionary dimensions of the exercise of authority that Weber felt was all too common in both the traditional and charismatic approaches.

Weber's theory focused on authority as the primary dimension that was to be exercised within organizational life. In doing so, he reconceived authority to be a *thing* that was a variable to be objectified and managed. Unfortunately, an understanding of how power actually functions, in relation to authority, was subverted within his conception. Weber's work contributed to the later rise of a theoretical framework within sociology that came to be known as the structural-functionalist school. The biases within this theoretical perspective have been thoroughly critiqued. However, the key point to be noted, in its understanding of authority with its subverted view of power, is that it was viewed primarily in technical terms as an entity to be managed.

Weber's rationalization of society paralleled the development of the rise of instrumental reason that has been advanced by Habermas.[3] Instrumental reason relies on technique to achieve efficiency. This understanding of reason came into vogue within organizational life in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century

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[2] Max Weber, "The Types of Authority and Imperative Co-Ordination," in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, edited by Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1947), 324-383.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests,* translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

through the work of Frederick Taylor's scientific management.[4] Authority became understood as something to be exercised out of one's role and position through the use of management and organizational techniques for the purpose of improving efficiency and accomplishing effectiveness within businesses. It was also assumed that some level of coercion would need to be exercised to secure compliance, along with offering various incentives. In the midst of this approach to the exercise of authority, the reality of how power actually functions in relation to authority became even more hidden. Organizations were understood to be made up of coalitions of competing interests where authority was required to make decisions and to bring about agreements. Lost in this approach was the location of power being embedded within social relations and context. Authority became an abstract commodity to be exercised by persons holding various positions.

This instrumental approach to the exercise of authority was picked up and refined in the United States especially within the business school model.[5] The most developed version of this approach came with the development of the open systems perspective and the rise of contingency theory in the 1960s and 1970s.[6] The focus was on securing the right outcomes as efficiently as possible. The key conception was that the management style that was required varied with each situation. The standard by-line of this theoretical approach became, "it depends." Strengthening this approach to the exercise of contingent-styled authority was the conception of the shaping of a dominant coalition,[7] where coalitions came to exercise control within an organization through the use of various managerial and organizational techniques.

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[4] Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1911).

[5] Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips, *Power and Organizations* (London: Sage, 2006), 1-38.

[6] Mary Jo Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76-78.

[7] James D. Thompson, *Organizations in Action* (McGraw, 1967).

An alternative view to understanding power and authority during this same period of theorizing in the twentieth century did exist. It is found in what came to be known as the human relations school. This theoretical approach conceived of organizations as being inherently cooperative rather than competitive, that people could change, and that people would work toward a common goal if provided with the opportunity.[8] This approach conceived of the arena of social relations as the place where authority was exercised, which was profoundly contributive to rethinking how authority functions within organizations. This perspective has come back into play in significant ways during the past two decades as will be noted below. However, within the human relations school, the reality of power issues were still mostly hidden or suppressed within the assumptions of cooperation and the changeability of people.

Alternative Critical Perspectives

Social critical theory takes an alternative theoretical approach to that of the structural-functionalist view in understanding the exercise of power and authority in organizations. There are at least three historical figures who contributed theoretical perspectives that served to help later theorists eventually develop this approach.[9]

The first figure to be noted is Karl Marx who conceived of power conflicts as being inherently embedded within the economic system and material dimension of reality. Class differences would of necessity result in class warfare. Perhaps Marx's most helpful contribution to a discussion of power and authority was his naming the exercise of power as being part of the very make-up of the economic order and through that to the very make-up of the larger social order.

A second figure to be noted as contributing to the development of critical social theory is Friedrich

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[8] Charles Perrow, *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*, 3rd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986), 79-118.

[9] Stewart Clegg, et al.

Nietzsche. He brought a devastating critique to almost every aspect of modern society and systematically deconstructed any foundations that could be associated with either morality or values. In the final analysis, Nietzsche conceived of the will to power as the fundamental basis of organizing the social order.

The third contributing figure is Michel Foucault. His archeological approach to discerning the origins of various social institutions and their patterns of human behavior are full of provocative insight. The key theoretical insight that Foucault offers to the development of social critical theory is the re-conception of knowledge that knowledge is power. Power is at work within the very construction of human knowledge and issues of legitimization and social control are deeply embedded within the use of language.

It was during the tumultuous 1960s that a number of post-structural theorists began to formulate a thorough-going social critical theory. They were deeply influenced by the twentieth century hermeneutical turn that was taking place at that time and most were searching for a different approach to theorizing about the human social order. The key insights of the three figures noted above were drawn into their work.

On the one hand, social critical theory engages in deconstruction in trying to theorize about the social order and the exercise of power and authority. The hermeneutics of suspicion are regularly employed in noting the historically situated nature of all human knowledge and its social construction. This brings the issue of the exercise of power and authority front and center into any and every discussion. It is assumed that conflict will always be present, even if it is sometimes latent. The issue regularly being questioned is, "Who is being privileged by this perspective?" To answer this question, this theoretical perspective also pays careful attention to the margins in exploring, "Who is being marginalized by this perspective?" These are understood to be flip sides of the same social reality, a social reality

that constructs meaning to privilege some at the expense of others.

On the other hand, social critical theory also engages in construction in trying to theorize how diverse perspectives can be brought into meaningful dialogue in order to reach new understandings of shared meaning. Habermas offers a theory of communicative reason as his way of trying to achieve this.[10] Others like Gadamer suggest the necessity of utilizing dialogue in order to develop shared understandings.[11]

Understanding Perspectival Views

Critical social theory has given rise to understanding every viewpoint as being perspectival, because all knowledge claims are now understood to be socially and historically situated. The notion of objective truth as developed by the positivism of the Enlightenment has been debunked with the collapse of foundationalist claims. Now the challenge that must be faced, as noted above, is how to establish sufficient grounds for shared understandings to be developed in the midst of difference. There are a number of perspectival views that are worth noting in regard to the exercise of power and authority, especially as this bears on religious leadership.

One view concerns the matter of gender relations. Carolyn Shields offers some insight into the issues associated with this issue, noting especially he problem that the use of dichotomies continues to bring into understanding gender relationships.[12] These dichotomies tend to perpetuate established misconceptions without adequately attending to ways of reframing gender

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[10] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationality of Society*, Vol. One, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

[11] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003), 341-380.

[12] Carolyn M. Shields, "Hopscotch, Jump-Rope or Boxing: Understanding Power in Educational Leadership." *Institutional Studies in Educational Administration*, 33, No. 2, (2005): 76-85.

relations. She draws on Foucault in wanting to carefully interrogate the discourses that are used in order to be able to identify who is being served by the constructions of language and behaviors that are being proposed. Her premise is that subjects must truly be free in order for there to be *power with* rather than *power over*. To accomplish this, there must be authenticity.

Another view has to do with a subset of gender relationships, when ethnicity interfaces with gender. Jacquelyn Grant offers some helpful insight, as an example, into understanding the social realities of African-American women in relation to white women.[13] She explores the concept of *servanthood* and notes how problematic this word is for black women in light of the history of slavery. She goes on to note that the theorized double consciousness of blacks who are in relationship with whites actually becomes a triple consciousness for black women. This is because, first of all, blacks are still mostly viewed as being subordinates to whites, and, second of all, because black women are still mostly viewed as being subordinate to white women. Shared gender is not sufficient to level the playing field in the exercise of power and authority in regard to the mixed reality of gender and ethnicity.

A third perspectival view that is worth noting is developed by Eric Law and concerns the inter-relationship of class, race and culture.[14] He starts by theorizing that peace is not just the lack of conflict through one group being able to control the behaviors of others. Justice demands that there be an equal distribution of power in order for there to be genuine peace. This has profound implications for the exercise of power and authority because different cultures view the

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[13] Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood," in Emilie M. Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 199-218.

[14] Eric H.F. Law, "What Makes a Lamb Different from a Wolf? Understanding Cultural Differences in the Perception of Power," in *The Wolf Shall Lie Down with the Lamb* (Chalice Press, 1993), 13-28.

exercise of inclusion in different ways. White culture tends to think in terms of representation – if your group is represented sufficiently, then you have equal voice at the table. Law points out that various minority cultures feel empowered only when they have their whole community present with them at the table.

Perspective matters when it comes to understanding power and authority. Carefully attending to differences in perspective is now accepted by most as being essential in trying to develop shared understandings. This necessity of attending to differences in perspective is one of the key insights that have contributed to a re-conception of power and authority in the past several decades.

Reframing the Conception of Power

An understanding of power is now in process of being theoretically reframed within sociological studies. A recent book that provides perspective on this work is that by Stewart Clegg et al., *Power and Organizations*.[15] The authors take the approach of conceiving of power as the *relation between*, or in other words power is best understood in terms of the *social relations* that shape the capabilities of people, the decisions that are made, and the changes that are effected. They see the classical views going astray in trying to objectify authority, which approach also tended to subvert an understanding of how power was really functioning. They acknowledge that the earlier human relations school was onto some of the right impulses in its conception of social relations, but that it did not have an adequate theoretical framework for addressing the complexities of such social relations within organizational life.

In this reconceived theoretical framework of understanding power as social relations, leadership takes on a fresh perspective. Leaders now lead by occupying relational spaces in regard to persons within the organization. The realities of role and position are still

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[15] Clegg et al.

understood to be a part of the social relations that are in play, but this approach offers a much more dynamic understanding of the exercise of leadership. Here power is conceived much more in relational terms and focuses primarily on how shared meanings are developed. These meanings are the result of a wide-range of social relations, including:

- Choices we make
- Actions we take
- Evils we tolerate
- Goods we define
- Privileges we bestow
- Rights we claim
- Wrongs we do

Power conceived as social relations offers an approach for revising as well as incorporating most of the theoretical work from the past by placing it within a dynamic and developmental framework. It is also a helpful framework for taking up the issues associated with bringing biblical and theological perspectives to bear on the exercise of power and authority.

Examining Biblical and Theological Perspectives

The Bible speaks fairly directly about power, especially the New Testament documents where we find frequent mention of the "principalities and powers" (e.g., Rom. 8:38-39; Eph. 6:12, Col. 2:15). During the Protestant Reformation, it was the enthusiasts and spiritualists who tended to pick up this language and employ it in relation to challenging the magisterial reformers and their protectors, the magistrates. As a result, the magisterial reformation, which consisted initially of the Lutherans and Calvinists and later the Anglicans, tended not to utilize the biblical powers language.

The magisterial reformers opted to institutionalize their understanding of the church around their various views of church office and then developed procedures that worked hand in hand with the social structures of

the state. In short, they worked to form *established* churches and they normalized practices and procedures within these into formalized church polities. The exercise of authority was front and center in these polities. It functioned primarily vertically through a series of ascending assemblies that in reality operated largely in a top down fashion. In this system the ordained clergy took on the primarily role of leadership in providing ministry to congregations. This conception of authority being tied to office actually anticipated many of the insights that Weber later brought to his ideal type of the rational-legal organization – the bureaucracy.

The biblical conception of principalities and powers continued to function within the Christian tradition over the next several centuries, but did so primarily on the margins. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that a number of biblical scholars began to reclaim this language for use by the mainstream churches. One of these was William Stringfellow who wrote about the powers in the 1960s in trying to understand and frame the convulsions taking place within society at that time.[16] Another was Hendrikus Berkhof who used this biblical language to try and explain the horrors associated with the wars of the twentieth century. He named such things as racism and ethnic prejudice as being part of the powers that needed to be unmasked.[17] A third scholar who reclaimed this language in the 1960s was John Howard Yoder, especially in his seminal book, *The Politics of Jesus*.[18] Yoder brought the biblical language of principalities and powers directly into his presentation of the ministry of Jesus in relation to Jesus confronting these spiritual and material realities.

Other important works along these lines have come into print since the 1970s. The most important of these is

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[16] See for example, William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (reprint Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004).

[17] Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 2nd edition (Herald Press, 1977).

[18] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

the trilogy written by Walter Wink.[19] He developed a thorough-going study and exposition of all the biblical passages associated with the principalities and powers. He concluded that they represent both spiritual and material realities in the world. He also noted that these perspectives represent a direct challenge to the modern materialist world view, a world view that many Christians unknowingly tend to adopt. Wink's understanding is that the church is called by God through Christ in the power of the Spirit to unmask all the powers in the world, which include:

- Heavenly and earthly powers
- Divine and human powers
- Spiritual and political powers
- Invisible and structural powers

He offers the further insight, one drawn from social critical theory, that the key to seeing the powers at work in the world is to examine a social system regarding who is being excluded.

Another recent voice that pays careful attention to the biblical language of the principalities and powers is Marva Dawn.[20] She expresses support for much of the foundational work developed by Wink, but brings critique to this work as well. On the one hand, she wants to broaden the notion of powers beyond the negative violence that she feels Wink overly accentuates. Dawn sees the principalities and powers as having been created good, though they are now fallen and are working in opposition to God. However, God in Christ defeated the powers and now is using the church to unmask them in order to redeem them for God's purposes. On the other hand, she also wants to stress more than Wink does that the spiritual realities of the powers have an influence in

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[19] Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Fortress Press, 1984; *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Fortress Press, 1986); and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in the World of Domination* (Fortress Press, 1992).
[20] Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

human affairs. She feels that Wink moves to readily to the material world as the primary location of the powers.

Suffering is a key theme that is associated with understanding God's work through Christ in relation to the powers. This theme discussed by Michael Gorman who notes the paradox associated with the biblical story about Jesus.[21] It is through Jesus accepting the powerlessness of his weakness in dying on the cross that the final victory over the powers is achieved. Paul picks up this same theme in his ministry in noting that it is in his own weakness that God's power becomes most manifest (2 Cor. 12:1-10). The key point is that God's power as a saving power is most manifest in the midst of human weakness. Therefore, the church is called to live a life of suffering service as the basis for unmasking the powers that Christ has already defeated (Eph. 3:10).

This understanding of the power of powerlessness, which incorporates suffering service, stands in stark contrast to one the ways that power has become popularized today in film culture. This has to do with what might be called the myth of redemptive violence. Popular culture tends to esteem the role of the one who can deliver persons from oppression. However, this deliverance is usually based on the exercise of significant force and violence in order to bring about justice. We see this played out in mythic human roles such as that of Rambo played by Sylvester Stallone in the Rambo trilogy. We also see this in the mythic cartoon action heroes such as batman, superman, and spiderman.

A Christian understanding of power presents a different world view. While accepting the probability that there will be force used and violence experienced as Christians live in the world, never-the-less, they are called to respond to these expressions of evil in a manner different than that of exercising force and violence in return. They are called to a life-style of suffering service

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[21] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 268-303.

that is willing to let the power of powerlessness unmask the principalities and powers, principalities and powers that have already been defeated through Christ's death and resurrection (Col. 2:15).

Summary

The exercise of power and authority within religious leadership is a timely topic to consider. For far too long, the church has tended to either avoid the subject or to subvert it within formalized organizational practices that are reinforced by standardized polities. This brief essay has attempted to lay out some of the key themes and perspectives that need to be considered for bringing this important topic more front and center within the church.