TEACHING WITH AUTHORITY

By EDWARD YARNOLD

NINETEEN-EIGHTY was the year of Küng and Schillebeeckx. The Vatican Authorities took proceedings against these two independent-minded theologians, which provoked a volley of protest from outside as well as inside the Catholic Church. Both theologians had won high acclaim as a result of their much-translated and widely-read works. Each had tried to write theology in terms which would make its mark with contemporary half-believers, rather than with those of untroubled faith, who did not feel any need to depart from the traditional categories of Catholic dogma. Both these theologians, however, had judged that it was not only irrelevant but counter-productive to employ some of the conventional formulas of orthodoxy: to do so would erect a barrier between themselves and many of their readers. Further, it would reinforce the impression that the central doctrines of Christianity could be expressed adequately, and for all time, in the traditional terms — and only thus. The consequence was that they both came under investigation by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The two cases were, however, very different. While both men are academics, Küng plays the media with a systematic energy which is quite foreign to the more discreet style of the flemish theologian. While both have refused to comply with what they regarded as unreasonable demands of the Sacred Congregation, Küng at times has seemed positively to dare the Vatican to proceed against him. He has been transferred from his Church-sponsored chair in the Catholic Faculty at Tübingen to one which does not involve him in the task of explaining Catholic Theology; whilst Schillebeeckx has merely been subjected to a series of requests for the elucidation of his views. Yet many of the general public, especially among non-Catholics, have judged both cases equally as examples of repression by the Vatican of freedom of speech and academic enquiry.

On the other hand, in the Anglican Communion there are theologians who have tried not only to restate traditional doctrine in contemporary terms, like Küng and Schillebeeckx, but to go further and deny the truth of the traditional formulations themselves. A good example is provided by the essays (not all, however, by Anglican authors) contained in the *Myth of God Incarnate* (1977). Last year witnessed another step along the reductionist path, in the shape of Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God.* As Cupitt, the Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, is in priest's orders in the Church of England, and others of his fellow-authors have also held responsible office in that Church, their writings have provoked protests (not always well-informed) from other Anglican Churchmen.

Questions have thus been raised during the last two years, which, while not new, many were hoping had been left behind as the two communions drew closer together: what checks are there to prevent the abuse of authority by the Vatican? What procedures are available to Anglicans to prevent the Good News from evaporating under the heat of unrestrained liberal speculation? In both communions, people who had watched the ecumenical endeavours, found their hopes disappointed or their suspicions confirmed, depending on their general point of view.

In this article it is my intention to treat of the practical exercise of the teaching authority in the Church; but first I wish to discuss the nature and purpose of that authority.

The authority of Jesus

Jesus 'taught them as one who had authority, and not as the Scribes' (Mk 1,22). This statement clearly does not mean that Jesus commanded the respect of the crowds because of some office he held. Authority was rather a quality inherent in his teaching itself. The Evangelists describe his hearers as 'astonished' (*ibid.*), using a greek word which is scarcely ever employed in the NT except to describe people's reactions to Jesus's teaching and miracles (*exousia*; cf Mt 7,29; Lk 4,32). The astonishment seems to have been caused, at least on one occasion, by the unexpectedness of his message, when he spoke of the difficulty with which a rich man is saved (Mk 10,26).

It is not only in teaching that Jesus's authority is evident. The synoptists most commonly attribute the quality to him in connection with his performance of works of power: for example, commanding unclean spirits (Mk 6,7), healing the sick (Mt 8,9) and forgiving sins (Mk 2,10). His words command assent like a military order (Mt

8,9), whether they are words of instruction addressed to his followers, or words of command addressed to spirits. (Mark couples the two exercises of authority together — 1,27.)

Jesus's authority was not based simply on personal competence, like that of an established expert in a particular field; it was something which he received as a delegated power. This is clearly implied in the questions of the jewish leaders: 'By what authority are you doing these things or who gave you authority to do them?' (Mk 11,28). Matthew represents Jesus as claiming after the resurrection: 'All authority is heaven and on earth has been *given* to me' (28,18). The claim is even more explicit in the Fourth Gospel: 'The Father has given him [the Son] authority to exercise judgment' (Jn 5,27; cf 10,18;17,2).

Nevertheless, the delegated power in Jesus was revealed, not by any extrinsic guarantee (like the written 'authority' of an official who reads the gas-meter), but on the 'astonishing' quality of his deeds and teaching, which produced this impression not so much, it would seem, because of the content as by the assurance and firmness with which he put it forward. The evident authority with which he taught stands in contrast with the teaching of the Scribes. One can hardly doubt that his teaching had a superior ethical content to that of the Scribes; but this is unlikely to be the point at issue here. Rather the crowds are contrasting Jesus's self-confident directness with the Scribes' cautious weighing of 'authorities'. 'I say to you' is the *leitmotiv* in the first section of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5), by which Jesus introduces his precepts; and this goes beyond what 'was said to the men of old' (5,33) — a very self-assured way of referring to the Torah! Elsewhere in the Gospels the formula frequently appears in the expanded form, 'Amen, amen, I say to you'. This 'use by Jesus himself in the Gospels is frequent and has no real parallel elsewhere. It is used to introduce solemn affirmations and adds a note not only of asseveration but also of authority'.[1] It was perhaps this turn of phrase with which Jesus pledged his own integrity in respect of the truth of his teaching, which in turn inspired the use of the word as a title of the risen Lord himself: 'To the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation' (Apoc 3,14).

Jesus was sometimes questioned about the source of his authority: by John the Baptist, for instance, who sent to ask whether Jesus was 'he who is to come'. In his reply, he appealed both to his miracles ('the blind see, the deaf hear . . .') and to the contents of his teaching

(' . . . the poor have the good news preached to them' Mt 11,3-5). The reply echoes phrases from Isaiah (35,5-6), and implies that Jesus is the one who has been anointed by the Holy Spirit (Isai 61,1), evidently at his baptism (cf Acts 10,38).

John the evangelist gives an even loftier account of the source of this teaching authority. What Jesus teaches his disciples he has already learnt from his Father: 'I have given them the words which thou gavest me' (17,8). 'He bears witness to what he has seen and heard' (3,32). 'The Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing' (5,20). 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (1,18). In the occasional passage in the synoptic Gospels Jesus appears as the divine personification of wisdom expressed in the sapiential books of the OT. The invitation,

> Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt 11,28-30),

echoes the words of Wisdom:

> Draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school. . . . Put your neck under the yoke. . . . See with your eyes that I have laboured little and found for myself much rest (Sir 51,23.26-27),

and also:

> Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my produce. For the remembrance of me is sweeter than honey, and my inheritance sweeter than the honeycomb (Sir 24,19-20).

To conclude: the gospels show us a Jesus who teaches with an authority conferred on him by his Father, guaranteed by his manifest confidence in his vision of the truth and by his works of power and mercy.

The Authority of the Church in the NT

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo!, I am with you always . . . ' (Mt

28,18-20). The risen Jesus delegated his authority to his disciples: 'he who hears you hears me' (Lk 10,16).

In St Luke's writings, Jesus, once ascended to his Father, sends down on his apostles the Spirit, by which he himself had been anointed at his baptism, in order to empower them, as he himself has been empowered, 'to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind . . .' (Lk 4,18-19, citing Isai 61,1-2). As Elisha picked up the cloak that fell from Elijah as he went up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and by its power was able to perform the same wonders that Elijah had performed, so the ascending Jesus clothes the Eleven with power from on high: that is, with the same Holy Spirit in whose power Jesus had carried out his own Spirit-filled mission.[2] Accordingly St Luke made his second book, the Acts, mirror several of the features of his Gospel, so as to show that the Church follows Christ in receiving and acting by the Spirit. Just as Jesus's teaching caused astonishment to his hearers, so the teaching and wonder-working of his disciples inspire 'fear' (Acts 2,43): the same Spirit which filled Jesus is also manifested in the missionary work of the disciples. So too in the Fourth Gospel. The Spirit 'remains' on Jesus after his baptism (Jn 1,32), and Jesus in his turn promises the Spirit to his disciples at the Last Supper (14,26ff), and imparts the Spirit after his resurrection (20,22).

There is, however, a difference: whereas Jesus's spiritual power was based on his union with the Father, the disciples' authority is based on union with Jesus. 'He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing' (15,5). 'He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father' (14,12). Just as the Father is the source of mission and spiritual power for Jesus, so is Jesus in his turn for his disciples: 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (15,10). 'He who confesses the Son has the Father also' (1 Jn 2,23).

Just as Jesus appealed to his works, such as the restoration of sight to the blind, for the authentification of his mission, so the true disciple is distinguished by the fruitfulness of his mission. 'You will know them by their fruits' (Mt 7,20; cf 7,15-19;12,33). Gamaliel proposes another version of the same test: 'If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them' (Acts 5,38-39).

We have seen that what is said of the Church's authority reiterates what is said of Jesus's own, but at one remove from the original: what the Father is to Jesus, Jesus is to his disciples. There are passages also in which this is seen to happen at yet one further remove: the disciple's adhesion to Jesus is tested and mirrored by his adhesion to Jesus's body, the Church: 'He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still' (1 Jn 2,9). If the gifts of the Spirit are given 'for building up the body of Christ' (Eph 4,12), whatever fractures the body of Christ is not of the Spirit.

The nature of authority

Biblical theology always needs to be anchored firmly to contemporary life, language and thought-forms. It is by no means to be taken for granted that the greek *exousia*, which is conventionally translated as 'authority', carried the same sense in the NT as the english counterpart does in the 1980s. 'Authority' usually denotes a relationship between two or more people; though it can, by extension, be used of an individual's mastery of his craft, as when we speak of an artist or a games-player performing with authority. When used in its fundamental sense of one person's relationship to another or others, the term refers to the capacity someone has to commend free assent to another. The word 'free' is essential. Authority is not synonymous with power, which is a wider term including the capacity to impose one's will by force. We speak of the power, not the authority, of a captor or a hypnotist over his prisoner or victim. The authority which calls for a free response can base its appeal on the personal qualities of the one in authority or in the office he holds or both. It is, however, a sad situation if an office-holder in the Church or in the secular sphere enforces his wishes simply by virtue of his office. In the Church, such a call for 'blind obedience' may indeed sometimes have to be made: 'I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now' (Jn 16,12). Such obedience may be required by faith, which is 'the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11,1). But it is the duty of one in authority to respect the intelligence and aspirations of those under him by seeking to engage every level of assent — head and heart, as well as blind will. Blind obedience is a last-ditch defence in a crisis, not an ideal or a norm.

Nevertheless, authority, though calling for a free response, may be backed up by the power to coerce. It is true that civil authority is based on an implicit 'social contract', by which a citizen recognizes

his duty to respect the law in return for the enjoyment of order, protection and the provision of vital benefits which he cannot provide for himself. But civil authority needs to be able to apply force to citizens who fail to keep their side of the implicit contract. However, authority based solely on fear of sanctions is bound to demoralize the subordinate. Consequently, if the purpose of authority in the Church is moral, since authority serves to promote spiritual growth, this purpose is frustrated to the extent that it depends on coercion.

Authority in the State is brought to bear on the citizen's actions: even in a police state, thoughts are not subject to the law. In the Church also, authority can be directed to action, whether this be by moral pronouncement or disciplinary regulation. But more fundamental in the Church is the exercise of teaching authority. For knowledge and love lie at the centre of personality; and it is from them that action springs: eternal life consists in *knowing* God and Jesus Christ (cf Jn 17,3). Hence the appropriate way to exercise authority over the actions of a free moral agent is to instruct that person.

But here a problem arises. Why does the Church need teaching authority? The Calvinist tradition sees sufficient aid to the believer in the interior illumination of the Holy Spirit, guiding the faithful to the right understanding of Scripture. This view accords well with the words which Jeremiah attributes to the Lord:

> I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts. . . . And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord (31,33-34).

In the time of the new covenant, John attributes a similar operation to the Holy Spirit:

> But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know [*or* you know everything]. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth. . . . The anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you (1 Jn 2,20-21.27).

Accordingly, the traditional distinction between the teaching Church (*Ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*Ecclesia discens*) can

be misleading. It seems to suggest that the clergy have the truth in virtue of their training and the grace of their state; whereas the laity have simply to receive the truth passively from the clergy. A cynic described the role of the laity as 'to pray and to pay'. A nineteenth-century bishop, who ought to have known better, declared that the function of the English Catholic gentry was to 'hunt, shoot and entertain'. Hence the ferment caused by Newman's essay *On Consulting the Faithful*, in which he showed that in many places in the early Church the ordinary believers had kept the true faith, while their bishops had succumbed to heresy. In this patristic period, it was the fidelity of the *Church* of the city of Rome to the truth that was remarked upon, rather than that of its *bishop*. There is much truth in this attitude. A bishop has no right to impose upon his people his private opinions. He is the witness to the faith of the Church: understanding by that term not an ideal, heavenly community, but the people who actually make up the Church at any given time. He has to articulate the faith of his diocese — and this includes his own faith — for his people and for the Church universal, and the faith of the universal Church for his people.

This faith of the people is not primarily a matter of concepts expressed in theological language: lay-people, either individual or corporate, have no claim to authoritative status in any theological pronouncements they make make. Where the guidance of the Spirit enables them to 'know' (in John's sense), is in their experience of a living relationship with God in Christ. The *sensus fidelium* is generally a reliable guide to the implications of christian doctrine for christian life, but not to the conceptual formation of christian theology.

But since faith needs to be formulated conceptually for the purposes of instruction, discussion and practical application, then conceptual formulation is needed. This task of articulation is the duty primarily of ordained ministers of the Church, especially the bishops. But they must not perform this teaching office in such a way as to reduce the laity to the role of the passive listener. Their function is subsidiary:[3] that is to say, it is their task to help the whole Church to be what it is called to be — in this instance, a people who, through the Spirit, 'know' Jesus Christ and his Father, and live their lives accordingly.

In doing this, the bishops should provide what Karl Rahner calls 'mystagogy'; like the priest, pagan or christian, who leads a candidate through a rite of initiation, explaining the meaning of what the candidate is *experiencing*, the bishop should encourage his

hearers to observe how his teaching is illustrated and verified by their own experience of christian life. If a bishop envisages his task rather as that of an expert teaching the ignorant, he will keep his people's faith in an infantile state, and prevent them from making to the Church the contribution of which each of them is capable in virtue of the gift they each receive from the Holy Spirit.

A parallel can be drawn from the need for the definition of a council or a pope to be subsequently 'received', by the Church. This reception does not constitute the validity of the definition, but without it such a definition, in the words of Yves Congar, has 'no vital force and does not contribute to edification'; for the faithful as a whole 'have the vocation and the grace to build up' the Church.[4] So too, more generally, the exercise of authority in such a way as to require blind compliance prevents the faithful from fulfilling their vocation in the Church.

The exercise of authority in the Church

Whenever possible, then, those in authority should not so much impose their will as commend it; in giving orders they should not regiment subordinates but try to convince them. At the same time, it may sometimes be necessary for coercion to be used. It is not difficult to think of circumstances in which a person must be removed from an office which gives him the right to be regarded as an official exponent of the Church's doctrine. It may even be necessary for someone to be deprived of membership of the Church if he persists in publicly rejecting the Church's essential teaching; for if a society is to have a purpose, it must reserve to itself the possibility of excluding those who reject that purpose. As George Bernard Shaw wrote in the preface to his play, *Saint Joan*:

> The Church should have confined itself to excommunicating her. There it was within its rights; she had refused to accept its authority or comply with its conditions; and it could say with truth 'you are not one of us: go forth and find the religion that suits you, or found one for yourself'.

Clearly, however, such measures should be a last resort. They have not been applied to the cases either of Küng or Schillebeeckx. As the religious correspondent of the London *Times* remarked:

> The Roman Catholic Church, with its strong instinct for unity and order, has shown itself well able to contain within its boundaries an

> unprecedented pluralism of theologies and spiritualities. Both Mgr Lefebvre and Professor Hans Küng have been left free to propagate their ideas, albeit with an equivalent of an ecclesiastical 'government health warning' tied around their necks (26 January 1981).

To share the authority of Christ, the holder of an office in Church must also share the qualities of Christ. We saw how Jesus's authority, which he received from his Father, was established by his confidence and his works of power and mercy. Accordingly, authority in the Church must possess three qualities.

First, it needs to be based on union with God and the sharing of the mind of Christ (cf 1 Cor 2; Phil 2,1-9).

Secondly, it needs to be exercised with confidence in God and in possession of the truth. It is not always inadequacy which makes Christians look for firm direction. But such direction must know its limits. As we have seen, it must not be excessive, but preserve and encourage the faithfuls' own responsible adhesion to the truth. In addition, firm direction is not inconsistent with the admission of uncertainty where this exists. To be unable to admit uncertainty is the mark, not of confidence, but of the lack of it. Few things do more to undermine authority.

Thirdly, authority in the Church needs to be revealed in powerful works of mercy — 'to proclaim the release of captives' — and in the *human* values of its teaching — 'to preach good news to the poor'. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve' (Mk 10,45). 'A servant is not greater than his master' (Jn 13,16).

NOTES

[1] J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee/London/Dublin/Melbourne, 1966), s.v. 'Amen', p 25.

[2] Cf E. Yarnold, *Heythrop Journal*, 7 (1966), pp 28-30.

[3] On the application of the principle of subsidiarity, cf H. Küng, *Structures of the Church*, (London, 1965), pp 215-16; also E. Yarnold, 'Venice, A Roman Catholic Analysis', in the *Ampleforth Journal*, 83 (1978), pp 49-50.

[4] 'La "réception" comme réalité ecclésiologique', in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, 56 (1972), pp 399, 401.