

Authority in the Community of Believers

Authority in the Community of Believers (Christian Perspective)

The question of who holds authority in the community of believers, or the church, is the most divisive issue in Christianity. “Authority” in this sense includes both the authority to discipline members of the church (including authority to excommunicate) and authority over what is taught (doctrine) in the church. In many cases, disciplinary and doctrinal authority are interconnected. For example, churches are divided today over whether women should be allowed to be priests (or ministers), whether practicing homosexuals should be allowed to be priests or ministers, whether abortion should be accepted or condemned, and so on. Each of these issues has a doctrinal aspect but also a disciplinary aspect. Broadly speaking, there are three major ways authority, whether doctrinal or disciplinary, is exercised in Christian churches: episcopal, (authority is vested in bishops), presbyterian (authority is vested in elected representative assemblies of presbyters or elders), and congregational (authority resides in the local church). This article will consider each of these, and will provide a sketch of how authority has been exercised through the history of the church.

The New Testament Period

During Jesus’ public ministry, he held supreme authority for his followers. He was seen as a worker of miracles, a prophet “mighty in word and deed,” a teacher greater than Moses, and, ultimately, as the Son of God. Several incidents indicate that he understood his authority to come from God and to surpass the authority of the prophets. For example, he forgave sins, (Mark 2:10), something which (in Judaism) only God could do. The Old Testament prophets had worked miracles and even raised the dead, but they never forgave sins, which was a prerogative of God alone. Jesus also claimed authority to change the law of Moses (Mark 10:2-9), which was understood in Judaism as having been revealed by God. He expelled demons, who recognized his divine authority (Mark 1:24). Finally, his resurrection from the dead was seen by early Christians as a vindication by God.

Jesus appointed apostles and disciples and gave them authority to heal the sick, cast out demons, and preach the gospel (Mark 6:7-13; Matthew 10:1-23). The apostles, especially the twelve, had authority in the early church after Jesus’ death. For example, Acts 15 shows us how the church reached the crucial early decision to admit Gentile converts to their midst. There, the apostles and elders of the church met in assembly to discuss the matter and decided –apparently by consensus—to admit Gentiles into the Church. They understood their decision to indicate the will of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28).

Authority in the Church to the Protestant Reformation

According to most churches which follow an episcopal structure of authority, the authority of the apostles was passed onto bishops, so that in the early church, bishops became the

successors to the apostles in authority. By the second century, most or all churches were governed by bishops, who were often elected and who were ordained by the laying on of hands of several other bishops. Thus, when decisions had to be made concerning a doctrine (teaching), the bishops met in councils or synods. The Council of Nicaea is a good example. It was convened by the emperor Constantine in 325 to adjudicate the teaching of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, who taught that the Logos or Son, the second person of the Trinity, was not coeternal with God the Father, but was created by God in time (the Arians had a slogan: “There was a when when he was not!”). Arius’ teaching meant that Jesus Christ was not one with God the Father, but was the incarnation of a lesser being, like an archangel. The council of about 300 bishops met at Nicaea and decided that this was NOT Christian doctrine, but heresy. They issued a creed affirming what was Christian doctrine (the Nicene Creed)—Jesus was one with God-- and condemning the teachings of Arius.

In practice, in the first fifteen hundred years of church history, both the Eastern and the Western church understood authority to be vested in bishops. There were two major variants of this theory.

1. The Eastern Orthodox churches held (and still hold) that authority is vested in bishops, and that the ultimate authority in the church is held by ecumenical councils of bishops. The statements of the first seven ecumenical councils (Nicaea: 325; Constantinople, 381; Ephesus: 431; Chalcedon; 451; II Constantinople: 553; III Constantinople: 680-681; II Nicaea: 787) are held to be foundational for the Eastern Church. There are a number of so called “autocephalous” Eastern Orthodox churches, e.g. the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, the Orthodox Church of America (OCA), the Antiochene Orthodox, the Romanian Orthodox, the Serbian Orthodox, etc.. These churches each have their own bishop, metropolitan, or patriarch who heads that church. But these churches are also in communion with on another
2. The Roman Catholic Church also vests authority in bishops, but holds that one bishop, the bishop of Rome or the pope, has primacy and jurisdictional authority over all other bishops in the Roman Catholic Church. Romans Catholics, like the Orthodox, hold that the decisions of the first seven ecumenical councils are binding on the church, but also recognize a number of later ecumenical councils, the last being Vatican Council II (1962-1965). Both Vatican Council I (1869) and Vatican Council II affirmed that the pope has jurisdictional authority over Roman Catholic bishops, that is the pope appoints them and can remove them. In any diocese (or archdiocese), it is the bishop (or archbishop) who has final authority in that diocese, but that bishop answers to the pope. It is the bishop who has the authority to discipline or, very rarely, to excommunicate a member of the Church. Similarly, it is the bishop who, as the supreme Pastor of a diocese, has authority judge whether a given teaching is orthodox or not.

The Protestant Reformation

In the sixteenth century in the West, a number of Protestant churches broke off from the Roman Catholic church. One of the central disputed issues was who should hold ultimate authority in the church. Luther challenged the authority of the pope (and ecumenical councils) in the church, and argued that every believer should be able to interpret the scripture for him or her self: there should be no class of priests or bishops to control the interpretation of the scriptures. Therefore he preached the “priesthood of all believers.” In practice contemporary Lutherans accept the first seven ecumenical councils, and in practice they do have ministers and even bishops (who are elected), but in matters of doctrine, the Lutheran position is that the ultimate authority is scripture.

The followers of John Calvin—the Calvinist or Reformed Churches (modern Presbyterian and Reformed churches)-- followed Luther in affirming the primacy of scripture. But Calvinist churches also instituted a representational model of authority. In its modern form, each local church elects representatives or presbyters to a “session” which governs the affairs of that church. Groups of churches are governed by a larger body, the presbytery, which consists of the teaching and ruling elders from a number of local churches. Finally, there is the General Assembly, which has authority over the whole church. There are a number of national Presbyterian churches, (the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., of England, etc.), each independent, and each governed by its own General Assembly. This is the Presbyterian or representative form of church authority. It had considerable influence on the development of representative government in the United States.

The Church of England followed an Episcopal but nationalist model of authority: the king (Henry VIII) in 1534 declared himself the head of the Church in England, This meant that he, not the pope, had the authority to appoint the Archbishop of Canterbury and to approve the appointment of other bishops of the Church of England. Eventually this authority was transferred to parliament, and in practice today the English church is governed by bishops with little influence from the British King or Queen. The Church of England spread to many countries during the period of the British Empire. In time, all these branches of the Church of England became independent of one another and of the Archbishop of Canterbury (who exercises only nominal authority), though they remain parts of the Anglican communion worldwide. Thus the Episcopal Church of the United States elects its own bishops without the influence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. But the recent decision of the U.S. Episcopalian church to ordain a practicing homosexual as bishop (Gene Robinson) has not been accepted by other Anglican churches, especially those in Africa, which may break of relations with the U.S. church.

Congregational Churches

During the Reformation period, many churches adopted a congregational model of church government and authority. This meant that authority and government resided in the local congregation; no pope, council of bishops, or larger assembly could tell that church what to do or what to teach. This model today is followed by Baptist churches, Pentecostal

Churches, so-called free churches, and many evangelical churches. The theory behind this mode of authority is that Christ is the only true head of the church, that all believers are priests, and that there is no mediator except Jesus Christ between the individual and God. These churches elect ministers to preach the word and administer the sacraments, but the ministers can be removed by the will of the local congregation (whereas a Catholic, Orthodox, or Episcopalian priest could only be removed by the local bishop).

There are strengths and weaknesses to each of these models of church authority. The presence of a pope in Roman Catholicism has ensured unity in a highly diverse church, but at the price of a centralizing authority in the office of the papacy. Even the Catholic bishops are not free to publicly debate crucial issues, --for example, the ordination of married men—without the pope's approval. Orthodox churches have strong bishops, but no central figure of authority who can ensure their cooperation. The presbyterian representational model works well for individual Presbyterian churches, but the various Presbyterian churches are not united among themselves, and moreover are experiencing internal divisions over questions such as the ordination of practicing homosexual clergy. The congregational model empowers the laity in local churches, but has no way of ensuring the unity of local churches with one another. To remedy this, Southern Baptist churches, and some Pentecostals (e.g. Assemblies of God) have national organizations which attempt to control both what is taught in seminaries and local churches, and to provide disciplinary measures.

In fact, few churches are purely episcopal, purely representational, or purely congregational. Most churches incorporate some features of all three models, but the balance differs from church to church. Thus, for example, Roman Catholic parishes have incorporated parish councils as advisory bodies to the local priest—bringing an element of congregationalism in to their churches.

Dr Terence Nichols

Authority in Community of Believers (In the Sunni School of Islam)

In Islamic thinking, in all its schools, the ultimate authority is God. God is the main source of knowledge and power. As the final messenger the prophet Muhammad is believed to have been chosen as the instrument of revelation. He was also the first to interpret the revelation and the highest authority to legislate, execute, and judge according to the revelation of the Qur'an. The prophet was the recipient of revelation on any serious challenge that faced the community, whether theological or political.

After the prophet, the authority to interpret the revelation, in the light of the exemplary practice of Muhammad as the ideal model was handed over to his followers, the community of Islam the (*ummah*). The scholars as the doctors of law and theology were the experts on both the Qur'an, and the legacy of the prophet the (*Sunnah* or the *Hadith*). The universal Islamic community has exercised the authority to interpret, rule, and judge according to the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the prophet through its best

minds and hearts, those who distinguished themselves as the natural leaders of the community by their faith, knowledge, wisdom, and service.

When the prophet died the *ummah* became diverse as to who would use this authority in the name of God. The nature and the identity of the leadership have varied from school to school. The Muslim *ummah* has predominantly chosen to follow the course of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* of the prophet as the unquestionable source of authority. This choice is based on a *hadith* used by the *Sunni* tradition which follows. "I entrust you two things as long as you hold on to them you will not go astray. They are the book of Allah and my *Sunnah*." In this *Sunni* tradition the prophet and the whole *ummah* shared equally the knowledge and the wisdom to judge and lead itself by the light of the Qur'an and the example of the prophet. The consensus was that the prophet trusted his community as a whole on the grounds that his community would not agree on error.

The prophet was purposely silent as to who would succeed him to lead the *ummah*. This *Sunni* tradition has arrived a consensus (*ijma*) that the prophet has not appointed any of his followers as a sign of justice and equality among his followers. Both theological and political powers were used by the community through its representatives. The Islamic faith and the law were interpreted and practiced democratically by the choice of the community. The political authority was vested in the *caliph* which means the successor either to the prophet or to God as the universal trustee or the steward according to various understandings. The first four caliphs were selected from among the immediate companions of the prophet on the basis of their righteousness (*taqwa*) and service to the cause of Islam not due to their kinship to the prophet. The *Sunni* school has accepted that the most liable to rule are the ones who are most eligible in faith, wisdom, and service to the cause of God. The leadership in both political and theological areas was considered a public duty incumbent upon not every individual but on the community as a whole. It would suffice that this responsibility to lead was carried out by some members of the community to represent and defend the whole. In this concept, the public authority is not of saving power as a matter of life and death but as a crucial matter for the protection and the welfare of the community. An individual Muslim is expected to work out his or her salvation without immediate need for a leader other than the guidance of the Qur'an and the inspiring model of the prophet. The leader of the *ummah* (the Caliph) was expected to have the will and the skills to lead the *ummah* to defend the borders, to insure the security and to be sure that the law was enforced. It was not necessary that the political leader was the best of the community in piety and knowledge.

The *ummah* in this *Sunni* school of Islam has given the authority to legislate and to judge to the *ulema*, namely the doctors of the Islamic law. These scholars took the knowledge from their masters who sat in circles of learning which have existed since the time of the prophet. The prophet set aside a group of his companions to devote their time to the study of the Qur'an and to teach it to other companions. The scholars were responsible for checks and balances on the political authority to make sure that this authority observed the revelation.

Thus in the Sunni tradition the system was based on the division of powers between the legislator, the court, and the executive *caliph* or the governing body. This theory of leadership has assumed that the power to rule theologically and politically could not be united after the prophet in any individual body. This division of powers imbedded in the community as a whole has served as the dynamic for change and survival of the community over the centuries. There have been times that the political authority dominated the theological and the legislative authority as in the case of the Umayyad period. At other times the *ulema* took control of things, as in the case of the disintegration of political authority in the late Abbasid days. There have even been times when the authority has shifted to the hands of the pious known as the *Sufis*. On the whole the *umma* has held the authority in its own hands and the authority of the law *shariah* has always held supreme. The political authority of the *caliph* has always been balanced by the *ulema* who were considered the heirs to the prophet: "the scholars are the heir to the prophets."

The caliph in the Sunni school served as the political head of the *umma* to both oversee that the *sharia* was implemented and to defend the borders of the Islamic state. From the late Abbasid period the caliphs became weak in power and their authority turned to be symbolic representing the unity of the *umma*. In 1924, the institution of caliphate was abolished by Ataturk. The newly elected parliaments (some Muslims believed) have replaced the office of the caliph. Many Muslims and nations were disappointed by the annulment of the caliphate thinking that they have lost their political unity.

Thus in the Sunni school of Islam, authority lies in the hands of the *umma*, namely the community of believers. The Islamic community is represented by the religious scholars (the *ulema*) who have the authority to interpret the Qur'an, and the Hadith. The *ulema* are the religious authorities who legislate, judge, and interpret the revelation according to the needs of the time. They are also the voice of the people against the ruling authority of the *caliph*. They were mostly disinterested in political positions and often were critical of it. The judges who were accepted by appointment of the government were called *qadiis*. They were also from among the scholars. The political authority lay in the hands of the *caliph*, who rules according to the religious law the *sharia* whose sources are the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* and the opinions of jurists.

Dr. Adil Ozdemir

Authority of the *Umma* – A Shi'i Perspective

The notion of a community of believers, the *umma*, is an important component in Shi'i Islam. Like Sunni Islam, salvation in Shi'ism is connected with the fulfillment of social responsibilities. Shi'is are required to pay the *zakat* and other religious taxes to the less fortunate. In addition, social principles like the promotion of good and prohibition of evil (*al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'l nahy an al-munkar*) and a concern for the welfare of the *umma* are an integral part of Shi'i beliefs. However Shi'is differ radically from Sunnis on the concept of the authority of the *umma*.

Like Sunnis, Shi'is believe that the ultimate authority belongs to God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. God reveals His will by investing His authority (*wilaya*) to numerous Prophets. For all Muslims, the Muslim community (*umma*) that Muhammad established in Medina was based on submission to one God and acceptance of his prophethood. The authority that Muhammad was claiming was comprehensive in that it was linked to his spiritual, military, and political powers. Thus, the all-embracing authority of Muhammad meant that to be a Muslim necessitated acceptance of his religious, moral, legal, and political, authority. Muhammad's claim to prophethood based on divine designation and a fusion of different forms of authority was a close approximation to the Judaic tradition of this archetype.

Shi'is saw Muhammad's comprehensive and all-pervading political and religious authority as having been transmitted to the twelve Imams, who were descendants of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, and his son-in-law, Ali. The belief in the imamate posited an inherited structure in which the religious and political authorities were fused in the figure of the Imam. Thus, although the *umma* is deemed to be extremely important, authority in Shi'ism lies in the leadership of the community rather than in the masses.

In Shi'ism, religious identity is conceived in terms of devotion to the Imams rather than to the *umma*. The believers are to coalesce under the figure of the Imam who, because of his charismatic qualities and divine appointment, becomes the edifice around which the religious aspirations of his followers are founded. Various traditions cited in Shi'i sources accord complete authority to the Imams. It is through them that God can be worshipped and known. In Shi'i sacred literature, they are referred to as the Imams of guidance and justice, God would guide people through them; they were the pillars of religion and life for humankind. The Imams were the sole guides to proper conduct in the crucibles of history. Shi'ism also posited a distinctive charismatic lineage of redemptive figures who offered salvation to the faithful. This is because salvation, as envisaged in Shi'ism, was contingent on the recognition of and loyalty to the Imams in general and to the Imam of the time in particular.

Authority during the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam

During the absence of the twelfth Imam, the function of guiding the community of believers fell to Shi'i scholars who composed many juridical and theological tracts. The most famous of these is al-Kulayni's (d. 939) monumental work, *al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din*. The political milieu ameliorated for the Shi'is in the tenth century when the Buyids (945-1055) came to power in Baghdad. Shi'i jurists now filled the leadership vacuum that was engendered by the major absence of the Imam.

After the establishment of the Safawid dynasty in Iran in 1501, Shi'i jurists resorted to various types of interpretations that were based on rational grounds or traditions reported from the Imams to exercise greater control over the populace, especially after the scholars were incorporated into the state apparatus. Jurists (*fuqaha'*) like 'Ali b. al-

Husayn al-Karaki (d. 1533) and Zayn al-Din al-'Amili (also called Shahid II - d. 1558) argued that, in the absence of the Imam, greater religious authority was to be assumed by the *faqih* or jurist. The jurists could now occupy judicial and political offices. They could, for example, serve as judges, collect religious taxes, and enforce legal penalties on behalf of the Imam.

Under the Qajar dynasty in Iran (1794-1925), the '*ulama*' (scholars) further enhanced their authority as the sole exponents of the law. Usage of interpretive reasoning and the institutionalization and centralization of religious leadership crystallized eventually in the concept of *marji' al-taqlid* (imitation of the most learned jurist). Murtada Ansari (d. 1864) was recognized as the most qualified *marji'* (source of reference for juridical rulings) of his time. Later, the actions of a believer who did not adhere to a *marji'*'s rulings were deemed to be invalid. In post-revolutionary Iran, based on the controversial concept of *wilaya al-faqih* (comprehensive authority of a jurist), Ayatullah Khomeini (d. 1989) established a theocratic state. Claiming the same degree of authority as the hidden Imam, Khomeini argued that the function of a jurist was equivalent to that of an Imam.

In conclusion, it is correct to state that authority in Shi'ism revolves more around the charismatic figures of the Imams than on the *umma*. However, as mentioned, this does not mean that the *umma* is not important. Whereas the Sunnis believed that the collective consensus of the community (*ijma'*) was legally binding, Shi'is believe that this authority rested in the Imams. Even during the prolonged absence (*ghayba*) of the twelfth Imam, Shi'i scholars have insisted that the opinion of the Imam was required to make any legal decision binding. They devised numerous methods to discover the opinion of the Imam.

Points of Agreement, Disagreement and Further Discussion

In both Islam and Christianity, there is a wide range of expression of authority. The Sunni model in which authority is vested in the community itself, which then elects its own scholars, leaders, and imams, seems to parallel the congregational model in Christianity. There, too, the ultimate authority is the local community itself, which elects its own ministers, scholars, and leaders. However, in congregational Christianity, there is no parallel for the political institution of Caliph. Historically, probably the closest parallel to the Caliph was the Christian emperor, beginning with Constantine, and carrying forward to the Holy Roman Emperor. In practice, however, the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor was limited to the Church in the west, and after the Protestant Reformation, no one had political authority over the western church.

There is no parallel in Christianity for authority vested in descendants of Jesus family, except for James, the brother of the Lord, who was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem in the first generation after Jesus. James, however, was killed in approximately 62 c.e., and there is no tradition of any other relatives of Jesus continuing to hold positions of authority in the Christian church.

In Shia thought, the twelve (or seven) Imams were infallible guides and interpreters of the Qur'an. There is a partial parallel to this idea in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope. However, the pope is only infallible in area of faith and morals, when he speaks as the supreme Pastor of the Church. He is not personally infallible. In practice, so-called infallible statements have usually been made by universal (ecumenical) council of bishops, for example, the Creed of the Council of Nicaea.

Conversely, there seems to be no exact parallel to the position of bishop in Islam. Bishops were usually elected by the people of a local or regional church, but they were also ordained by existing bishops of the area. Thus they derived their authority primarily from the college of bishops, which was itself a successor to the college of apostles. Their authority was not simply that of scholars, not simply political. The idea was (and is) that the Holy Spirit guides the bishops when they make decisions concerning the teaching, morals, and discipline of the Christian church. In this view, then, the ultimate authority is vested first in God, then in Jesus, then in the apostles, then in the bishops, who are the successors of the apostles. The ultimate locus of authority, then is not the community, though the community often elects the bishops, but the college of bishops itself. This model applies to all Episcopal churches, including the Roman Catholic, which sees the bishop of Rome as having a preeminence among the bishops. Probably the closest parallel to the college of bishops in Islam would be the community of the Ulama, though their authority derives from their scholarship, not from the guidance of the Spirit of God. (Note that the Holy Spirit, in Islam, is identified with the Angel Gabriel, not with the Spirit of God).

At bottom, the problem of how to discern what is God's will, and what is the authoritative interpretation of God's word (scripture) is a common problem to both Islam and Christianity, and indeed to any religion which claims to be based on revelation. Both the bible and the Qur'an have passages which seem to contradict each other, and so require interpretation. The question, then, is who is the authentic interpreter. In practice, most branches of Christianity, and in both Sunni and Shia Islam, the scholars of the scripture hold considerable authority, though in Episcopal Christian traditions, the authority of scholars is balanced by the authority of the bishops (who, however, often are scholars themselves)