The Idea of Religious Authority
with Professor Víctor M. Muñiz-Fraticelli, Political Science & Law

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Background

Philosophical modernity ushered in a widespread rejection of authority in favor of personal moral autonomy; concurrently traditional forms of non-state authority were also challenged. In his seminal defense of authority, Joseph Raz provides both an argument for the coherence of authority as a concept and for the compatibility of moral autonomy and obedience to authority. He argued in his **service conception of authority** that authority may be justified when it is in the service of the subject and helps her better comply with her own ends. In this project, Professor Muñiz-Fraticelli and I sought to investigate religious authority and to develop an argument for its eligibility for a Razian service-conception of authority.
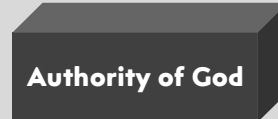
Guiding questions

1. Is religious authority conceptually distinct from other kinds of authority?
2. Are the reasons given to justify religious authority irrational or inaccessible to nonbelievers?
3. Can different instances of religious authority be explained through existing conceptual frameworks of modes of authority?

Research objectives

- To investigate the modes and domains of religious authority
- To explicate an argument for the eligibility of religious authority for a service justification as developed by Joseph Raz for secular authorities.
- To outline a book on religious authority

Modes of Religious Authority

Studying Jewish and Catholic religious texts on authority, we found that religious authority takes many modes, many of which are unified by their implicit justification to be in the service of the adherent by assisting her to better comply with her ends as shaped by her religious commitments. While religious authority is frequently ultimately based on revelation, religious authority pervades nearly all domains of religious life and is strikingly like secular authority at the institutional, legal, and personal level.

The "black-box" of the authority of God

Some of the Modes Identified

- **Prophetic** – Critical of institutions yet canonized. Authority draws on the authority of the word of God.
- **Priestly** – Claims authority to best serve God in ritual and prayer.
- **Political** – Religious endorsement and sanctioning of secular power through religious argument
- **Interpretive** – Provides the service of best interpreting religious tradition.
- **Revelational** – Sanctioned content as divinely communicated.
- **Personal** - In the service of religious believers, usually endorsed by texts and institutions.

The Authority of God

In our research, we found that the authority of God is distinct from other modes of religious authority. Whereas other modes of religious authority *mediate* the authority of God (through tradition), the authority of God appeals to that which *transcends* the universally accessible world of sense and reason. Thus, it is the most difficult to incorporate into a service-conception of authority developed on the axioms of secular philosophy. Additionally, critics of religion see reasons that appeal to the authority of God as a "black-box", and an argument for the eligibility of religious authority must thus explain how the authority of God can be compatible with modern conceptions of reasoned autonomy no worse than other kinds of transcendent principles that underlie ethics.

The Domains of Religious Authority

Religious authority also functions in many domains. **Practical authority** is authority to tell one what to do. **Theoretical authority** is authority over knowledge and belief. **Hermeneutic authority** is authority over interpretation. Religious authority interweaves these domains of authority in the same people or the same sources. For example, Orthodox Jewish Rabbinic authorities claim both hermeneutic and practical authority when they interpret canonized legal texts to direct adherents on how to best comply with law in each situation.

Literature consulted

- *The Jewish Political Tradition volume 1: Authority*, ed. Michael Walzer et. al. Yale, 2003.
- Ed. Richard Gaillardetz, *Readings in Church Authority*, Routledge, 2016.
- Joseph Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, Oxford, 1986.
- Joseph Raz, *Between Authority and Interpretation*, Oxford, 2009.
- "Authority" by Tom Christiano in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, Oxford, 2013.
- Various secondary sources on Judaism and Catholicism,
- Political theory on authority and religion.
- Legal theory on the role of religion in the public sphere and constitutional understandings of religious freedom and religious accommodation.