Karl Rahner on Authority in the Church

Susan Abraham

Harward Divinity School, Cambridge MA 02138, USA

Is Vatican II still relevant in the current contentious debate between relativism and fundamentalism? Is the institutional Church being irresponsibly heavy-handed? Who has authority and who gives it? Who or where is the Church? What is the role of the individual Christian vis-à-vis tradition? These are some of the questions I attempt to answer in this short reflection on Karl Rahner's ideas on "authority" and "Church."

I will argue that Karl Rahner presents an expanded idea of both "authority" and "Church", especially in his later writings. These ideas have immediate relevance and importance for any contemporary debate on authority in the Catholic Church, in that they express a strong hope in the self-renewing ability of the institutional Church and an optimistic view of the Church's capacity to read the "signs of the times."

Rahner presents his expanded ideas of "authority" and "Church" in the context of the Second Vatican Council, and it is instructive to briefly visit a small selection of his essays regarding the significance and theological underpinnings of Vatican II. In an essay titled "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council" (*Theological Investigations*, **XX**, 1981), he argues that Vatican II was the beginning of a "tentative approach by the Church to the discovery and official realization of itself as world-Church" (78). However, he also concedes that it was only a rudimentary gesture hesitatingly manifested. Such a hesitation gives rise to particular critical and theoretical concerns that arise from a European mentality operating to oversee cultures that have different values and expressions. He bemoans the fact that at the Council, when different rites were represented, there was no African dancing to be seen (79). Nevertheless, Vatican II was significant in that there was, for the very first time, a consciousness that the Church was now a global phenomenon, seen in the participation of Episcopal sees that were not North American or European.

Vatican II signals a shift in the epochs of the Church. In his view, the "coming-to-be" of the "world Church" was a process that can be divided into "three great epochs: a) The short period

---

* The author specialises on Karl Rahner and may be contacted at <Sabrboston@aol.com>

Abstract: Is Vatican II still relevant in the current contentious debate between relativism and fundamentalism? Is the institutional Church being irresponsibly heavyhanded? Who has authority and who gives it? Who or where is the Church? What is the role of the individual Christian vis-a-vis tradition? These are some of the questions I attempt to answer in this short reflection on Karl Rahner's ideas on "authority" and "Church."

of Judaeo-Christianity, b) The period of the Church in a particular cultural group, that of Hellenism and European culture and civilization and c) The period in which the Church's living space is from the very outset the whole world" (83). Our contemporary time (post Vatican II, 1980s) is a period similar to the period involving the transition from Judaeo-Christianity to Gentile Christianity (85) and as significant and far-reaching in its consequences as the former shift. In the decrees of the Council, this consciousness enabled the victory of the vernacular in the *Constitution of Liturgy* for example. Latin could never function as the language of the world Church, avers Rahner, simply because it was the language of a small and particular cultural sphere. Thus Rahner:

> The victory of the vernacular languages in the Church's liturgy is a clear and urgent signal of the coming-to-be of a World Church, with its particular Churches each existing autarchically in its own cultural group, rooted in that culture and no longer exported from Europe. It is of course also the signal of all the new problems of a world-Church whose non-European particular Churches—despite their bonds with Rome—can no longer be governed by Europe and European mentality (81).

This is one example among others that Rahner provides to couch his thesis, which is to prove that Vatican II was committed to the Church of the future. Such a commitment will manifest itself in a "plurality of proclamation" as the churches that are not European work out a creative response from their own cultural and historical specificity; a

"plurality of liturgies" as these churches reject European languages and come up with their own particular idiom, and even a "pluralism of Canon Law" that is developed in dialogue with these larger churches. The mode of dialogue is critical in Rahner's estimation—he points out that in *Gaudium et Spes*, for example, the mode of expression was more in the form of "instructions and appeals" rather than "dogmatic teaching valid for all time" (89).

In addition to the idea of the world-church, in the *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner provides an interpersonal dimension of the Church. "Church" here is necessarily "institutionally tangible" in that, because of God's self-offering, the reality of interpersonal relationship becomes a particular mark of Christianity. Salvation history is to be understood as the history of God's self-communication to us, experienced in time and space. Following this perspective we can see that in the Christian understanding of a human being as an interpersonal being (on account of our being oriented to God and neighbour), there necessarily has to be an ecclesial component (323). Christianity is patently not a "religion in a private kind of interiority" but rather is one that faces with rigour its concrete historical and social nature. It is but "late bourgeois" mentality that would think that religion has nothing to do with society and with the Church but it is also true that the doctrine of the Church is not the central truth of Christianity (324).

Nevertheless, Rahner castigates an "ecclesial consciousness of a militant kind" that is attempting to make

ecclesiality the most central and specific thing about Christianity in an indiscriminate manner. This has the effect of watering down Christianity, in that militant ecclesiality has the quality of focusing on the specific distinction of Roman Catholicism while ignoring the more "Christian realities like the Sermon on the Mount, (and) love and freedom of the Spirit." Rahner points to Vatican II here, specifically to the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) which states that there is a "hierarchy of truths" (referred to by the Council) operating in Catholic doctrine which if applied to militant Christianity would show that ecclesial consciousness is not the basis of Christianity. The basis of faith is unambiguously "Jesus Christ, faith and love, entrusting oneself to the darkness of existence and into the incomprehensibility of God in trust and in the company of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one" (324). What Rahner means here is that the formal authority of the teaching office of the Church is not the most fundamental datum for a Catholic Christian. In the hierarchy of truths, the teaching authority of the Church is a relatively secondary one and the more fundamental one is Jesus Christ. We are only moved to have faith in and belief in the authority of the Catholic Church because of the gospel.

The changing self-definition of the Church as world-Church also impacts its authority. The Catholic Church has authority, because this authority has its source in Jesus Christ. There is a *Christological* reason for the teaching office (379). This is so because there was no absolute teaching authority or a teaching office before the Church of Christ. In Rahner's view, the teaching authority cannot any more be satisfied with mere formalistic authority claims. It is not enough to say this, asserts Rahner, because it would seem improbable to modern people today. We have to focus rather on the fact that it is *Jesus Christ* who is the absolute, irreversible and invincible climax of salvation history. Further, as with every authority, the ecclesial teaching office operates on many levels corresponding to various concrete faith situations and speaks with all of its authority only rarely (381). The authority of the teaching office therefore is universal precisely because in the world-Church there is a universal faith in Jesus Christ. However, it is also obligatory for this teaching authority to be sensitive to different concrete faith situations. Concomitantly, we can expand our understanding of authority and the Church, which is not always the outcome that is generated.

Sometimes the Christological reason for the teaching office is obscured. The reason for this, in Rahner's opinion, could be that in the formal conceptual model of the magisterium, there is no reference to the Church as such. In the essay titled, "The teaching office of the Church in the present day crisis of authority" (*Theological Investigations*, Vol. XII) the formal conceptual model, he claims, foregrounds Jesus Christ as the absolute teacher and prophet *par excellence* who delivered to the apostles a specific body of teaching, equipping them thus with a specific formal authority deriving from

himself. The apostles are also equipped and authorized to stand before others and claim allegiance to their faith while simultaneously also being able to preserve the message in an undistorted manner, to interpret it and to explicate it. Further, the assistance of the Spirit of Christ is promised to them to make the "right use" of the formal authority to teach and guarantees that the use of the authority to teach is infallibly preserved from error when accompanied by a claim to an absolute assent of faith on the part of those to whom the message is addressed. Only in the context of the *assent* of faith on the part of the community can the fullness of their authority be brought about.

Since in this formal model there is no direct reference to "Church" as such, there is an unfortunate tendency to see the "Church" as something that passively receives the authority of the teaching body. He emphasizes that Vatican II initiated a number of moves to bring about a clearer picture of the "Church." This was accomplished by replacing the old and one-sided idea of teaching and speaking as coming from the officials while the "Church" passively and obediently accepts authority directed towards it, with a more correct idea of the Church comprising of both groups in a reciprocal relationship. In fact, according to Rahner, the point of the conceptual model is precisely to show that the apostles were bearers of a teaching authority only because they themselves were believers and hearers. The teaching office, therefore, can in no way be separated from faith and neither can it be separated from the community in which the apostle/teacher is a member.

In other words, Rahner reiterates that the authority of the officially appointed teachers in the Church derives from the Church as a whole. The "infallible" authority of the pope to teach, for example, must be understood as derived in a real sense from the "active teaching authority of the Church as a whole" (7). This derivation from the Church, underscores Rahner, is not to be understood as incompatible with the derivation from the teaching authority of Christ: "because ultimately speaking, the derivation of a specific office from Christ is nothing else than an element in the derivation of the Church as a whole from Christ" (7). However, clarifies Rahner, Vatican II also specifically maintains that the authority of the pope and bishops is to be seen as deriving univocally from Christ and is aimed at the Church rather than deriving from it. Here it is to be understood that the decisions made by the pope and bishops need not necessarily be in agreement with the Church as a whole. At the same time, it is also emphasized that the pope speaking *ex cathedra* is not acting as a private individual, rather as the "supreme teacher of the universal Church." In this sense, any infallibility imputed to the pope is a reflection of the infallibility of faith imputed to the Church as a whole.

What Rahner is pointing to is the concrete *theological* content of the Church's teaching office, which is distinct from the formal and juridical framework within which it is generally

understood. This theological content is influenced by the nature of the Church as a world-Church; by its realization that authority derives from Jesus Christ and by the fact that the authority of the popes and bishops is representative of the universal Church. The teaching office cannot merely claim formal authority today but must make clear that the authority it claims comes from the very reality that it is concerned to uphold. It is true, asserts Rahner, that in previous epochs and particular stages of the history of the Church, these procedures so clearly identified by the statements of Vatican II, have not been implemented or followed. In contemporary times, it is incumbent on the teaching office to acknowledge the human factors involved in arriving at truth. However, there is sometimes a tendency to point to forces that are extrinsic to human activity and to see God's intervention as occurring only when human efforts are suspended. This is a mistake, says Rahner, and emphasizes that God works in and through human efforts, and that these human efforts are an intrinsic element of the teaching office itself.

In other contemporaneous writings (1965-67), he outlines more clearly the shape and procedures involved in the Catholic Church becoming a truly global Church. In the essay titled "On the Presence of Christ in the Diaspora Community according to the Teaching of the Second Vatican Council," (*Theological Investigations*, X, 1973) he emphasizes the presence of Christ in every local community. "Church" in this essay is not only the universal Church in unity with the pope and the bishops,

but also individual local communities. Often ecclesiologies (referring to Scholastic, Modern etc.) ignore the local community as "church", often treating it as an administrative subsection of *the* Church. However, Vatican II applies the term "church" also to individual local communities of worshippers. Rahner translates the relevant Latin sentence: *Haec Christi ecclesia adest in omnibus...congregationibus localibus* as: "the Church, the one Church of Christ, is present in its entirety in every local community" (88). What is meant here is that the local community constitutes *the* Church in virtue of the fact that it is in unity and communion in faith, love and law with all the other communities of Christ.

The key procedural component of this global Church is dialogue. In the essay "Dialogue in the Church," (*Theological Investigations*, X, 1973), Rahner states that Vatican II initiated a new spirit of collegiality and equality in its proceedings. Dialogue is "communication of ourselves which is aimed at mutual and loving acceptance" (104). If one were to accept the other persons in all their uniqueness and particularity, differences in viewpoint are but a "secondary expression" of this phenomenon. Can we really have a dialogue, asks Rahner, when questions of faith are concerned? For him, there is unbounded optimism that the Church can and must engage in such dialogue, because the Church also has the capacity to learn and to be led deeper into its own fundamental truths. Given the reality that the Church today is a world Church and that it exists in individual and particular local communities, dialogue

is critical for its continued relevance and importance.

The Church's global nature and its diverse discrete components point to an intellectual plurality, which forms the impetus for such dialogue. We are faced with a complex reality, says Rahner, and the old order that saw the world as homogenous and easy to comprehend is ending (107). This reality is within the Church itself, not something that is outside of itself. *Lumen Gentium* (No. 25) therefore asserts that dialogue is a "suitable human means" and indispensable for the Church's pastoral authority and work. Dialogue supplements the exercise of authority, just as the exercise of authority supplements that of dialogue. However, one cannot be a substitute for the other.

What are the gains to be had from this study of Karl Rahner on Church and authority? The spirit of Vatican II imbues Rahner's writings. In presenting us with a theology of Vatican II, Rahner points to ways in which self-reflection can lead to greater inclusion and respect. From the writings that form the basis of this essay, it is clear that Rahner optimistically sees the effects of Vatican II in the expanding idea of Church as a world-Church in which authority is positively related to the context within which it is exercised in the spirit of dialogue.

Though it can be argued that the whole of Rahner's theology is fundamentally rooted in a very Western conceptual and philosophical anthropology, there is a spiritual component in all of his work that provides us with a positive resource for

a specifically Indian analysis of the ideas of authority and Church. For example, the idea that authority is derived partly from the infallibility of *faith* can lead us to greater communion with churches around the world and can also lead us to enacting our prophetic and visionary responsibility. Secondly, the idea that "Church" does not merely refer to the magisterium or to the episcopate but to an inclusive community of the faithful is most certainly a healing move in the current acrimonious relationship between the "West" and the "East." Thirdly, and most importantly, Rahner has unfailing faith in the Spirit's presence in our modern pluralistic world. This gives us new hope in the current debates regarding relativism and fundamentalism. Rahner points out in "The Abiding Significance of Vatican II" (*Theological Investigations*, XX), that there is an opportunity even in the modern, liberal and relativistic mentality. Historically, the modern liberal mentality has provided for an atmosphere in which the ecumenical movement could grow (89). This awareness, however, has genuinely Christian roots and has helped us to abandon an older and more closed mentality. I will let him have the last word:

All in all...it has to be said that before the Council, the Catholic Church regarded the non-Roman Catholic Churches...as organizations of heretics ... non-Christian religions were no more than the terrible darkness of paganism ... That in an ecumenical unification the non-Catholic Churches might also bring with them to the one Church of the future a positive heritage from the history of Christianity

in a form not known in the old Church; that the non-Christian religions even in their institutional form might exercise a positive salvific function for non-Christian humanity; none of this was actually explicit in the Church's awareness, but is present there now and can never be excluded, since it is understood, not as a liberal mentality of modern times, *but as an element of the Christian outlook as such* (99) (Emphasis mine).

Reference

Rahner, Karl

1993 *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych, New York: Crossroad, 1993

1954-1984 Schriften zur Theologie, Vols. I-XVI, Einsiedeln—Zürich—Köln: Benziger.

English translations specifically used are:

1973 "On the Presence of Christ in the Diaspora Community according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council" & "Dialogue in the Church" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. X: Writings of 1965-67, no. 2, translated by David Bourke, New York: Herder and Herder, 84-121.

1976 "The Teaching Office of the Church in the present-day crisis of Authority" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XII: Confrontations 2, translated by David Bourke, New York, Seabury, Crossroad, 3-30.

1981 "Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council"

"The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council"

"The Future of the Church and the Church of the Future"

"Structural Change in the Church of the Future"

"Dream of the Church"

in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XX: Concern for the Church, translated by Edward Quinn, New York: Crossroad, 77-142.

The Silenced Speak

Evelyn Monteiro SC

Dept of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune

1. Introduction

Today's world is marked by varied social, political and religious upheavals directed against the authority of parents, teachers, the Church, the state and powerful nations. The map of the world had changed as nations freed themselves from the exploitative authority of colonial rule. The world map continues to change as poor nations strive to free themselves from the oppressive authority of neo-colonialism. The resurgence of various emancipation movements among women, races, ethnic groups, etc. reflects gender, racial and ethnic aspirations for greater freedom, justice and equality. Increase in rebellion among adolescents against parents express a revolt against authority in family life. The silent exodus of Christ's followers from the one, holy, Catholic Church to the many Christian communities is an exasperated expression of 'enough is enough' against the cold fortress structure of patriarchal domination and clerical domestication of ecclesial life. With the new trend of open thinking there is a clamour for dialogue on issues such as sexuality, abortion, human rights, social justice, etc. wherein the Church had once shown a remarkable caution and had even closed itself to discussion because of their complexity.

The world today is also marked by a trend to return to the past and restore authoritarianism. There is tension between those who promote greater personal freedom and those who advocate greater control and exercise of authority. Such movements and trends have caught the Church unawares because its mode of functioning depended largely on a hierarchical system of authority that championed unchanging laws, unquestioned obedience and unqualified sanctions against law-breakers (Dominian 1976: 3). The Church has also to face a radical transformation in its understanding of authority that was based on the love of law to a theology based on the law of love. The 21st century is witnessing an authority-freedom conflict at various areas of life-relationships: in the family, at school, work, in the society and the Church. From the macrocosmic centralized power of the universal Church to the microcosmic level of seeking greater autonomy of the local churches, Christians have a fundamental responsibility to re-formulate a distinctively Christian view of authority

---

* The author may be contacted at <jdv@vsnl.com>

based on the one source, Jesus Christ of the Gospels.

2. Changing Style of Authority in the Church

The present crisis of authority in the Church and theology, writes J.B. Metz, has its roots in the fact that "the Church is paying the price of letting the people become too little the subject of the Church, of allowing the voice of the history of the life and suffering of the people to become stifled; and of letting the Church become the 'Church for the people' rather than the 'Church of the people'" (Quoted by Waldenfels, *Concilium* 2 1985: 31-42, 37). In this essay, we do not intend to draw up a clear-cut blueprint for the Church to restructure itself as a 'community of people.' Neither, do we intend to make a break through the theological mystifications and religious legitimisations of patriarchal authority that will enable the people to reclaim their rightful place as ecclesial subjects nor enter into an academic discussion on the theology of authority. We shall rather attempt to analyse the intrinsic dynamics of authority that have emerged over the centuries and have patriarchalized it. Following which we shall endeavour to propose dynamics of change for a renewal in its understanding and practice.

Looking back at the 2000 years from the inception of the Church, we note that the Church had well accommodated itself to the notion and practice of authority, taking on the secular model of key historical periods. Initially, there was no model because Jesus did not leave behind any. However, like any other human group, the early Christian community required some authority to maintain its identity, unity and integrity. Its organization was simple, flexible and minimal with a strong communitarian dimension. Ecclesiatical authority bore a charismatic character.

From the post-apostolic period, authority took diverse forms of expression that were evident in the way the Church structured itself at different places and periods. With the division of offices the first traces of hierarchical patriarchy set in. Bishops were singled out as men possessing special spiritual gifts. Their authority gradually became more pronounced because of their apostolic succession. This system functioned well until the Constantinian period when the organisation pattened itself on the Roman imperial mode. Spiritual authority in the Church now gradually takes on a secular and hierarchical nature. The political and legal concept and definition of Roman imperial authority decisively influenced the church's theological tradition and understanding of authority as 'father power over,' writes Fiorenza (1993: 245). The gradual patriarchalisation of the Christian community appropriated the Roman imperial notion of authority-submission, thus restricting women's leadership presence and teaching authority in the Christian community. Ecclesial authority was understood in terms of 'power over' in the hierarchical order of the Church that caused the silencing and exclusion of women from the mainstream. This injunction was scripturally legitimised (cf. Tit. 2:3-5; 1Tim. 2:11) by the Fathers of the Church.

It was the Gregorian reform of the 11th century, claims Congar, and later the development of the Code of Canon law that gave rise to a more juridical notion of authority (Komonchak 1996: 75). The escalating centralizing and juridicizing of ecclesial authority from the 11th to the 16th centuries evoked several counter currents and protests movements. These protests not only questioned the historicity of the highly monarchical ecclesiastical authority then existing but also challenged it in principle. The unfortunate reaction of the Catholic Church was a reassertion of papal primacy at Trent (16c) and Vatican I (19c) that caused the institutional form of authority to reach its high watermark. With the break out of the French revolution (18c), an atheistic philosophy of authority emerged. The Church could not fall in line with it and to counter its influence absolutized the monarchical model.

The rigid institutional model that followed Trent and Vatican I gave rise to a self-affirming, power and glory oriented theology of authority. The ecclesiastical offices of the ordained hierarchy which were intended to be offices of service (*diakonia*) became offices of authority, power and glory. Royal ideology and glory theology dominated the ecclesiastical thinking and functioning and this was reflected in many ways in the life and witness of the Church (Robinson 1989: 10). The dispute of the early disciples as to "who was the greatest" and the struggle for power, prestige and position were the accepted ecclesiastical culture of the patriarchal hierarchy. In this hierarchical order that followed the dynamics of glory and

power, the minority powerful patriarchy dominated the ecclesial scene and the majority subjects continued to be the forgotten and invisible lot.

3. The Patrimony of Authority

The history of the Church illustrates the fact that different forms of authority have always existed in the Church. Models for the organization of the local ecclesial communities were taken from the praxis of political and legal organization in the Greek, Roman and subsequent secular political empires. This explains the growing organizational trends in the Church, the progressive centralisation of ecclesiastical authority within the Church and the increasing patriarchalization of the Church order.

The Church favoured an institutional form of monarchical-hierarchical authority structures. It sheds its human face and takes on the nature of an autocratic and powerful ruling that hammers on uniformity, orthodoxy and submission. Rule and law take precedence over love and compassion. The distance, coldness and impersonal nature of laws and codes replace the spontaneity, intimacy and closeness of community life. The ruling class of the male clergy becomes the Church "for the people" who becomes the receiving group to be "looked after" as the Church taught and the Church governed. The women-Church becomes the subjugated group to be "ruled over" and is relegated to the bottom rung as the silent and invisible Church.

The legalistic style of exercising authority has choked the life out of the

Church. Women are made the primary target of oppressive inequality. The gradual patriarchalization of the Church excludes women from sacramental and policy making ecclesiastical powers and teaching authority and restricts women's leadership. The patriarchal ecclesial structure resorts to the Aristotelian argument for the patriarchal order of household and state and the Thomistic theology affirms "the female sex cannot signify any superiority of rank, for woman is in a state of subjection" (S.Th Suppl. 39.1ad.1) (1992: 246).

Just as the wife is supposed to uphold the paternal authority and policy in the family in many cultures, women are expected to uphold without dissent the authority and teaching of the patriarchal hierarchy in the Church. The patriarchal pyramid of domination disfigures the true face of ekklesia as a discipleship community of equals. Rigid rules and the cold Code of law turns the ecclesial community, the dream of God, into a rubrical institution. Love of law has replaced the spontaneity of love, theatrical solemnity has obscured beauty, orthodoxy has paralysed creativity and uniformity has killed innovation.

Could we not say the same of women religious congregations that mirror in miniature form the life and structure of the Church? Holy rules had made 'religious robots' who were conditioned to live a pre-programmed life. The members were held together by uniform external structures which were supposedly effective means of assuring community 'wholeness' and community holiness. Uniform habits/sari, organized joy (recreation), fixed

prayer exercises – often prepared by the male clergy, the breviary for instance which is highly androcentric in language and thought, the celebration of the Eucharist, often ritualised by the male 'pujari,' recollection and retreat conferences, often a monologue of patriarchal spirituality, etc. are some examples of the dominating influence of patriarchy. What emerged were disfigured women religious from a miniature replica of the institutional patriarchal mould that killed their innate femininity. The finished product was eventually a biological woman clothed with layers of male indoctrination. Religious life took on the nature of a military camp with the Mother General along with her lieutenant-superiors controlling rather than fostering life, which is an inherent gift of every woman.

4. Re-styling Authority in the Church

This authoritarian scenario of the Church remained until Vatican II that laid the groundwork for a substantial restructuring of the exercise of authority in the Church. It brought about a certain balance between primatial and conciliar aspects of authority by re-imaging hierarchical authority as service (LG 24), recognizing the principles of collegiality (LG 22,23) and legitimate diversity (LG 23), and re-covering the spiritual and charismatic character of authority. However, in spite of these well-meaning shifts, an important area of authority that has not been adequately and directly dealt with is its patriarchal dimension that still continues to have a powerful influence on the life of the Church. Although Vatican II describes

the Church as the People of God and emphasizes the equal importance of all its members (LG 9-17), the same document re-affirms the authority of the patriarchal hierarchy (LG 18-29). The failure of the Council lies in its neglect to abandon the concept of the Church as patriarchal-hierarchical institution and to recognize wholeheartedly the equal importance of the place and status of women in the Church. As long as authority is understood and practised as 'power over' the community and remains only in the hands of one section of the community, the essence of Church as communion is destroyed. A radical departure from the clerical absolutism of authority in favour of an alternative inclusive model may accelerate the realization of a Church as community of equal discipleship.

In our effort to demythologize the patriarchal model of authority, we shall attempt to work on an alternative model. Reflection on the metaphor of God as woman and as mother is an endeavour to re-contextualize the paternal model of authority with its longstanding tradition of patriarchal direction that was assimilated into the monarchical language of God as King, Master and Lord (McFague 1989: 138-139). However, using the mother imagery for authority is also inherently problematic for the mother image is not unambiguously positive. The inherent ambivalences of the mother figure as wrathful, moody, inadequate are well expressed in the Hindu portrayal of the mother goddess (Kali) as both benevolent and malevolent, though ultimately the positive elements overcome the negative ones. Exploring the mother-metaphor may

introduce us to areas of human experience that will be particularly illuminating to uncover the unknown nature of authority that was obscured by the predominant patriarchal mode.

This is, however, not an attempt to establish an alternative parental mode. The parental model runs the risk of placing the 'people of God' in the child status rung. At an age when each one of us needs to take responsibility for our world, our society and our Church, we cannot support a model that suggests a 'father/mother-child' relationship of dominance and passive dependence. This is also not an attempt to establish a new hierarchical dualism with a matriarchal model of authority. Rather, it is to investigate a rich source of unexpressed aspects of authority which may be discovered in the God-cosmic relationship where one finds interdependence and mutuality of life. This could be best explained in the metaphoric language and understanding of God as mother of all beings and of the cosmic earth.

A caution though – we do not want to fall back on the stereotype of biologically programmed maternal imagery where a mother is supposed to be naturally loving, self-sacrificing, patient, enduring and comforting. Such stereotypes of mother are social and cultural constructs. Rather, we will focus on the basic and essential qualities that women are inherently endowed with: give birth (life) and foster growth. The powerful maternal metaphor may help retrieve the lost and forgotten character of authority and restore its authentic and full meaning.

5. An Alternative Mode: The Maternal Model

5.1 Authority is life-giving

The maternal model of authority is a powerful model for our times, but by no means it is the only one. It is particularly relevant for today's nuclear ecologically threatened age. It makes us profoundly aware of the value and vitality of life, as one gifted by the Creator to be fostered and flourished. The maternal model may provide us with the direction to retrieve the missing links for the proper understanding of authority. Authority like maternal love is a gift of life to others. It is giving life unconditionally, without expecting or calculating a return. It wills life, nurtures it and desires it to grow and be fulfilled. Authority derives its power from the basic act of giving life to others. In doing so, it empowers the other. We are accustomed to think of authority as an abstract concept, as an intellectual and physical act, exercised through words or actions that control and dominate the other. But the maternal model with the imagery of giving birth and caring suggests a different mode, one which underscores interdependency and inter-relatedness. (McFague 1989: 140).

Perhaps, a paradigm shift in our imagery of God as Father, Master and Lord to the maternal metaphor of God as mother, the creator of life, may enable us to recover a more complete and biblical understanding of authority. We need to demythologise the patriarchal understanding of the 'male sky God' that Christianity has inherited from the Hebrew and Graeco-Roman traditions and re-discover the all-pervading presence of the 'female-earth God' of the Eastern traditions succinctly expressed by the 18th century Hindu saint, Ramprasad:

O Mother! Thou art present in every form;
thou art in the entire universe
and in its tiniest and most trifling things.
Wherever I go and wherever I look,
I see Thee, Mother, present in thy cosmic form.
The whole world –earth, water, fire and air –
All are thy forms, O Mother,
the whole world of Birth and death
(King 1989: 128).

The omnipotent and transcendent male God of the Graeco-Roman tradition supported a hierarchical dualism which became the accepted pattern for other social organizations such as the family, Church, etc. Consequently, God as the dominating male head also represented an understanding of authority as controlling and subjugating. The cosmic God supports an egalitarian system of love and compassion, of life and harmony. This is powerfully expressed in the Hindu *Magna Mater*, *Shakti*, the supreme female principle. At the cosmic level, *Shakti*, the primodial divine energy, is the womb of life and is responsible for the creation and preservation of all life. She is the dynamic power that makes everything alive. She also reveals the tender, gentle, reassuring and motherly dimensions of the Divine. This cosmic God, as the endearing mother, promotes an understanding of authority as assuring presence, supportive care and fostering growth.

The vision of the maternal model opposes, as an inadequate expression of authority, the hierarchical-patriarchal model that stresses authority as command, not service, and obedience as submission or conformity, not Christian freedom. In fact, the existing patriarchal-hierarchical model of ecclesiastical authority is in conflict with the Gospel models of the shepherd, the steward and the servant. The shepherd and steward imageries of authority often remain on the spiritual plane and are used as ornamental liturgical themes and the feet-washing imagery remains a symbolic liturgical act while the maternal essence of 'feed,' 'tend' and 'service' is lost in the power structures of the ordained patriarchal hierarchy.

Authority has the potency to nurture life in the other through a support system of encouragement and appreciation. Authority is not mere giving life and leaving the person to fend for himself/herself. No mother would do that. Such a mode of authority runs the risk of creating delinquents who have been undernourished with inadequate supportive care. They become passive dependents or aggressive independents. Besides, if authority does not assure a supportive presence, the maternal mode of authority may revert to the paternal model of control that stunts or obstructs growth, discourages all dissent and restricts creativity.

We find this happening in our Church that is committed to its missionary cause of welcoming the 'spiritual' birth or re-birth of Christians and of expanding Christian communities. However, the commitment to nurture that spiritual life and build communities founded on firm faith is seldom continued with the same zeal and seriousness. Consequently, what remains is a perpetual infant Church that the shepherds in the order of patriarchal hierarchy 'tend' with authoritative care. In this Church, the focus on authority and obedience is one of coercive power that suggests distrust of the members who are envisioned more as children than as responsible adults.

God has endowed men and women with freedom. This freedom has given humankind a certain amount of autonomy in managing its affairs in this world. This God-given freedom is for a creative purpose. God never sets a limit to this creative freedom: God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:28). It is to be noted here that God has entrusted men and women with a caring responsibility all living things in the air, water and the earth and of all humans. In their relation to the humans and the created world, God gave then freedom to promote life in an unlimited way (Gen. 15:5), but no freedom whatsoever to diminish or destroy life. We have unlimited freedom to engage ourselves in fostering life-creating structures conducive for life, redeeming those whose lives are threatened, broken or wounded. God does not wish anyone to interfere in such acts that promote life for God himself is involved in such acts. When this authority is abused for dominating, oppressing or destroying and eliminat-

ing life, we inflict a slow death on the weak and the disadvantaged (Robinson 1989: 21-23). Our freedom and autonomy are for generating, fostering, enriching and preserving life. Authority that is born in the 'womb' of God is expressive of God's very being that creates, sustains, fosters and supports all life. The idea of divine motherhood in Hindu mythology adequately represents this truth. Divine motherhood expressed as the Great Mother, Nature Goddess, Mother Earth or Devi is the origin of all life and of the world. She is the source of everything, of the human and cosmic world. She has the power to nurture and sustain them all and ensure their continuity.

5.2. Authority is impartial and all-inclusive

Maternal authority is impartial and inclusive. It desires all to flourish and recognizes the intrinsic worth of each one. This is justice ethics. God who is the author of all life and the mother of all existence, of all beings and of the entire cosmos, desires the growth of the entire human and cosmic order. The word "authority" that comes from the Latin *augere*, cognate with the Greek *auxanein*, means "to cause to grow, to increase" (Sesboue 1991: 69). Etymology uncovers a dynamism underlying the word "authority" that produces and promotes growth.

Authority desires the well-being and fulfilment of all, irrespective of caste, language, gender or region, for all are called to be partners in establishing God's Kingdom. It undercuts all forms of hierarchical dualism: male-fe-

male, rich-poor, dalit-Brahmin, Whites-Blacks, Christian - non-Christian that benefit those in the upper rungs of the power ladder. Authority is attentive to any unjust elements or oppressive power forces that thwart the growth of another. Rooted in divine providence and human nature, authority is a positive reality that unites people and gives cohesion and direction to the community and society.

5.3. Authority is empowering

Stewardship authority is power sharing. It is based on mutual respect and trust where the subjects grow in responsibility, motivation and independence. It helps to bridge the chasm between the powerful and the powerless, the dominating and the dominated, superior and inferior, hierarchy and subordinates. A failure to part with or share power is symptomatic of a deep-seated malaise. Hence, any authority, whether the 'patriarchal-mother' Church or the good mother/father religious superior or idealistic parent that does not or cannot delegate responsibility is at a disadvantage. In fact, both the power holders and the powerless subjects are the losers. While the former remain perpetual insecure autocrats, the latter thrive on being passive dependents or aggressive independents. This is particularly observed in patriarchal dominated institutions like the Church and women's and men's religious congregations.

The prophetic charismatic authority is empowering. It is integrative, challenging and enabling. It encourages a goal-oriented atmosphere, and communication at all levels. It fosters a spirit of mutuality, interdependence and re-

spect. Any authority that lacks these qualities, Rahner notes, functions as an absolute monarchy that encourages a closed system in which dialogue is impossible (Rahner 1974: 89).

Empowering authority is transformative. Founded on trust, mutuality and openness, it fosters collaboration, participation and creative action. It delegates and persuades, never imposes, and encourages dialogue and consultation (Arbuckle 1999: 99). It shapes and shares a vision with others. It is sensitive to the potential for growth. It encourages innovation. Prophetic or charismatic authority is transforming. It empowers people to become more active, more creative and more motivated to work in inter-dependency. In contrast to the 'saviour/rescuer' model that makes the other perpetual dependents, it encourages responsible exercise of authority so that the people become agents of their own growth and that of the community (Rahner 1974: 106).

Charismatic authority gives a sense of purpose, meaning and vision that raises one's hope and self-worth. It enables the other to take charge of one's own life in trustful cooperation with others and to grow up to be real people. Jesus himself used this strategy in exercising the authority that God had empowered Him as Son of God "this is my beloved Son, listen to Him". Jesus is empowered to continue God's salvific work in redeeming our broken and wounded human and cosmic order and restoring it to wholeness "I have come to give life in all its fullness" (Jn 10:10). He is Saviour, yes, but not an autocratic one who imposes his power on people. His empowering strategy is

"Ask ... knock...seek... (Lk. 11:10); he does not "push against our freedom" (Rahner 1974: 106). Human consent "do you want to be healed" (Jn 5:6) or initiative "come and lay your hands on her" is always sought in empowering leadership for it gives a sense of hope, meaning and vision. Authority that empowers is sensitive to the creative worth of a human being and his/her potential for growth. It is keenly aware of forces that obstruct the rightful empowerment of people. It believes in the inner worth of each person.

Here, we are not advocating a stand that opposes authority and law. Both authority and law are an inescapable part of human life but they are not the principal means to sustain life. When authority is not empowering it takes on the nature of being prejudiced and partial. When power is not shared, the authoritarian person assumes a split personality for his/her survival. Such a personality is well described by D. Wright as one who is submissive to those above him and dictatorial to those below him, respectful and subservient towards authority, brusque and contemptuous towards his subordinates, conservative and conventional in her/his beliefs and generally opposed to freedom and self-indulgence, stresses the power of those who have authority and the helplessness of those who do not have (Wright 1971: 188). In such a system of authority, one notes that there is an intrinsic inequality of status and extrinsic rupture of relationship.

5.4. Authority is relationship

The phenomenon of authority is basic to human behaviour. It is not a

property of a person or office. It is rather a ministry of relationship. Women and men are created in God's image. Women and men are equally images of God. God created the first couple in perfect equality, each with distinct characteristics but both "man and woman are human beings to an equal degree" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 6). Their relationship was neither predominantly patriarchal nor matriarchal, neither one of domination-subordination order nor of master-helper nature as the misinterpretation of the 'helper myth' in the creation story led us to believe and accept as the norm of man-woman relationship. It was one of perfect mutuality, transparency and equality, symbolically expressed in their 'nakedness' (Gen. 2:25).

It is in this first human relationship between woman and man that we find the genesis of true authority, as deigned by God. The woman and man were both responsible for and to each other. Both were entrusted with equal responsibility and trust as God's co-creators to continue His creative work. (Gen.1:28). Their relationship was one of mutual dependency, destined to serve each other and not lord over one another. God shares His creative power with the woman and man "God blessed them" (Gen.1:28) and empowers them to be co-authors of life "be fruitful and multiply" and co-builders of a human community. As stewards, both are enabled with caring power to fashion a cosmic world of beauty and harmony (Gen 1:28).

In this order, neither woman nor man is mandated to be the sole 'head,' to control, dominate or dictate. Rather, both are empowered to be leaders, fa-cilitating growth and fostering life. With the fall of humans who fell a prey to the subtlety of the greed to have dominion over (Gen.3:7), the 'nakedness' (transparency) of authority is clothed with garments of control and domination setting limits to our life and power (Gen. 3:21). With the fall, patriarchy is given its first spiritual coating of divine sanction. In the fall, man and woman lose their equal dignity (cf. MD 10). Humankind becomes divided and the cosmic order loses its harmony. The androcentric myth of Eve, the Temptress and 'helper' of man, is capitalized by the patriarchal mindset that appoints men as rulers over women, over every living creature, and over the earth. Authority, thus, departs from God's original plan of equally shared charge of the care and welfare of the created world and takes the form of rule and control. Every human is created after the likeness of the Creator. The reality of our being created and not being the Creator enables us to see life as a gift that is shared with the other and that empowers the other. "To have dominion over" does not make us "gods on earth" to control and exploit. Rather, it makes us caretakers of the human and cosmic world.

When authority is shared, it invites the other to enter into a relationship of partnership. In this partnership model, the biblical reference to the woman as 'helper' (*ezer-neged*) gives a particularly different insight into the customary patriarchal understanding of authority as superiority, strength, dominion or power. In several passages, *ezer* also characterizes Yahweh as helper who creates and saves (1Chr. 4:4; 12:9;

Nehemiah 3:19). It is a relational term that connotes equality and designates a beneficial relationship. It does not specify graded positions within relationships nor power to be exercised over another. It rather connotes equality. Woman is the helper equal to man in exercising authority. Authority is basically to trust and entrust the charge of caring for the welfare of the human-cosmic world. As co-creators, it implies that we do not have limitless power and freedom. The eternal truth is that God created man and woman in equality and free of subordination. Therefore, both are destined to serve the 'other.' Both are destined to serve the human and cosmic world, to heal it from its brokenness and re-create a "new heaven and a new earth" with newness of life.

God's original plan of equality and co-responsibility is restored with the promise of redemption in Jesus. In the new order brought in by Jesus, authority receives a new dimension. In Christ, all discriminatory exercise of power disappears. There is inter-dependency and mutuality of service. The new dimension brought by Christ, gives a sacramental expression to authority that harmonizes the masculine and feminine characteristics of the Creator.

The human Jesus of the Gospels gives us insightful guidelines for the ministry of relationship. He used human dynamics to make himself truly present to the other. He exercised a transforming and empowering mode of authority. Jesus' relationship with God, his Parent who is both Father and Mother is the key to all his authority. He is obedient to His Parent (Jn. 6:38).

But in this obedience there is no inequality of worth "the Father and I are one" (Jn. 10:30). There is no lack of fullness or wholeness "I am the Way, The Truth and the life" (Jn.14:6). In his dependence on God , His parent, Christ does not lack anything essential, "all that the Father has is mine" (Jn.16:15; 5:26). His relationship with the Parent was one of equality, with distinct roles as persons of the Trinity. Christ's relationship of obedience to the authority of his Parent was based on love to which he responded freely with no trace of coercion. Hence, there was absolutely no room for inequality in such a relationship. (Jn. 10:17-18). Thus, obedience and love are intimately linked in Christ's life. The basis of this obedience was the intimate relationship between the Parent and Son and not a response to the compelling or coercive powers of some authority. It is not obedience to an external source of power but to a source of love that Christ shared with his Parent (Jn. 17:21-23) (Dominian 1976: 89-90).

6. Conclusion

Authority is for mission. It is life-giving, growth-promoting and empowering to restore God's reign of harmony in our fragmented human and cosmic world. It is a relationship that fosters radical discipleship – to be more prophetic, more truthful and just, more compassionate, more communitarian and more witnessing. Since the Council, the silenced and invisible Church is becoming increasingly aware of its right to speak and to be seen, and of its responsiblity to be partners in realising God's dream of "a new earth and a new

heaven." The silenced who speak today voice more than a call to incorporate some women into the patriarchal pyramid of control. The silenced rather call for a metanoia of the whole Church from patriarchal authority that subjugates to a prophetic mode of authority that facilitates a civilization of love, builds a discipleship community of equals and fashions a new society through inter-dependency and inter-relatedness.

References

Arbuckle, G.A.
  1999 *Refounding the Church,* London: Penguin.
Dominian, J.
  1976 *Authority,* London: Burns and Oates.
Fioreza, E.S.
  1993 *Discipleship of Equals,* New York: Crossroad (London: SCM Press).
King, Ursula
  1989 "The Divine as Mother," *Concilium 206.*
Komonchack
  1996 *The New Dictionary of Theology,* Bangalore: TPI.
McFague, S.
  1989 "Mother God," *Concilium 206.*
Rahner, K.
  1974 *"Confrontations,"* *Theological Investigations XII,* London: Longman & Todd.
Robinson, G.
  1989 *Siding with the Poor,* Madras: The Christian Literature Society.
Sesboue, Bernard
  1991 "Authority," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement,* WCC Publications.
Wright, D.
  1971 *The Psychology of Moral Behaviour,* London: Penguin.