Authoritarianism: Psychological Reflections and Theological Implications

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Introduction

The end of World War II as well as the defeat of Nazism and Fascism in Europe spurred western psychologists to investigate the phenomenon of authoritarianism prevalent in the culture of the 1930s and 40s. It was a dark period of brutal and irrational behaviours on the part of some leaders and their followers. Questions like: why did people elect and follow enthusiastically authoritarian and non-democratic leaders, why were the Jews particularly targeted as the object of prejudice and elimination, what were the characteristics of authoritarian personalities, what was the role of obedience in such a society ...etc propelled an abundance of research in this area.

A team of U.S. psychologists led by T.W. Adorno researched some of the above questions and published their findings in a book entitled *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford 1950). The basic conclusion is that authoritarian personalities tend to have a cluster of traits that predispose them towards accepting extreme political ideologies, such as Nazism. John Duckitt in his book, *The Social Psychology of Prejudice,* describes the authoritarian character structure "as conservative, afraid of freedom, submissive to authority, obedient, yet with natural aggression distorted into brutal sadism. Such persons are acquiescent subjects in authoritarian societies and are strongly attracted to authoritarian and fascist ideology" (Duckitt 1994:193).

More recently the concept of the authoritarian personality has been further refined through empirical research by psychologist Bob Altemeyer (1981 and 1988). He has suggested that three attitudinal clusters, namely, conventionalism (conformity to norms), authoritarian submission (obedience to leaders), and authoritarian aggression (intolerance of deviance) make up the syndrome of the authoritarian personality. It would therefore seem that authoritarianism is closely related to the way individuals relate to their ingroups (as followers) and the outgroups (as aggressors). Altemeyer, in his recent book, *The Authoritarian Specter* (1996), has demonstrated how authoritarianism

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Abstract: The end of World War II as well as the defeat of Nazism and Fascism in Europe spurred western psychologists to investigate the phenomenon of authoritarianism prevalent in the culture of the 1930s and 40s. It was a dark period of brutal and irrational behaviours on the part of some leaders and their followers. Questions like: why did people elect and follow enthusiastically authoritarian and non-democratic leaders, why were the Jews particularly targeted as the object of prejudice and elimination, what were the characteristics of authoritarian personalities, what was the role of obedience in such a society is propelled

is consistently associated with prejudice, discrimination and hostility against members of outgroups.

Purpose

The purpose of the present article is to describe and discuss some of the theoretical underpinnings of the authoritarian personality syndrome and more importantly to draw out the implications of this extensive psychological research for the Church in India.

The make-up of the Authoritarian Personality

As noted earlier, three important clusters of attitudes make-up the authoritarian personality, namely, conventionalism, authoritarian submission and authoritarian aggression. A brief description of each one will enable us to flesh-out the concepts better.

Conventionalism refers to a rigid adherence to conventional "middle-class" values. Researchers found, for example, that a statement such as, "a person who has bad manners, habits, and breeding can hardly expect to get along with decent people" would be strongly endorsed by individuals high on authoritarianism. Endorsements of other similar statements would indicate that such individuals are more "conventional" than others. In general, persons subscribing to "conventionalism" tend also to be conservative and anxious to maintain the status quo.

A conventionalistic individual would often adhere to conventional values due to heavy social pressures; such pressures could also come from collective powers, such as a fascist State or a

fundamentalist group. The preoccupation is to conform and the payoff is a sense of belonging to that particular group, on which one can depend for emotional support and identity. It is widely accepted that conformity pressure is one of the more important mechanisms for exerting social influence and control. The now famous experiments of Asch (1952) whereby he demonstrated conformity by an individual when under heavy pressure from his peers proves nicely the power social pressures exert on individuals.

Authoritarian submission entails a submissive, uncritical attitude towards idealized moral authorities of one's ingroup. For example, a statement such as "obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn" would receive strong endorsement from authoritarian individuals. Adorno et al state furthermore that "authoritarian submission was conceived of as a very general attitude that would be evoked in relation to a variety of authority figures – parents, older people, leaders, supernatural power and so forth" (Adorno et al 1982: 160). Another statement frequently endorsed by those prone to this attitude is, "It is essential for learning or effective work that our teachers or bosses outline in detail what is to be done and exactly how to go about it."

As is obvious in authoritarian submission, conformity and obedience play a vital role. Unquestioning obedience to strong leaders had been one of the more important aspects of the Nazi creed and continues to be the case with fundamentalist groups and religious sects. In terms

of psychoanalytic thinking it is hypothesized that blind obedience is a way of handling ambivalent feelings toward authority figures; in other words, underlying feelings of hostility and rebellion which are held in check due to fear, cause individuals to overdo their allegiance to the leadership by obedience, respect and excessive subservience.

Authoritarian aggression is a tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values. For example, strong endorsement is given to a statement such as, "it is only natural and right that women be restricted in certain ways in which men have more freedom." There seems to be a readiness to condemn other people on moral grounds. Quite frequently this is due to a projection of one's own unacceptable impulses onto outgroups. Hence a statement, "sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment; such criminals ought to be publicly whipped" elicits high endorsement from authoritarian individuals.

It is believed that aggression is displaced onto outgroups because authoritarian personalities are unable to attack ingroup authorities. Furthermore, the aggression is justified in moralistic terms and can become quite violent at times. It reflects intolerance and punitiveness towards persons not conforming to the norms of the ingroup. It almost seems as though authoritarian aggression is a natural outflow of the two earlier attitudes described above.

The entire discussion regarding conventionalism, authoritarian submission and authoritarian aggression indicates a strong linkage between the authoritarian personality and prejudice. The next section will elaborate further on this connection.

Authoritarianism and Prejudice

The relationship between the authoritarian personality and prejudice has been amply documented in the psychology research literature. For example, people high on authoritarianism have been found to be prejudiced against minorities in the U.S. (McFarland and Adelson 1997), and handicapped people (Noonan, Barry and Davis:1970); furthermore, similar findings were also reported when studying Russian samples (McFarland, Ageyev and Abalakina 1992), and the Indian personality (Hasan 1994).

What could be the potential causes for prejudice in persons scoring high on the authoritarianism scale? Altemeyer in his article, "The Other 'Authoritarian Personality'," highlights two characteristics in such individuals. First, authoritarians tend to look at the world in terms of outgroups and ingroups; furthermore they look at the outgroups as a source of threat because they (the authoritarians) feel that their traditional values and way of life is being undermined by the outgroups. This perceived threat is then used as a justification for hostility and even violence against the outgroups. Also the ingroups denigrate and vilify the outgroups through the use of negative and derogatory stereotypes which the authoritarians consider a legitimate way to protect their superior values and way of life.

Second, authoritarians tend to be self-righteous and moralistic. Hence, they have no problem looking down on others particularly those defined as less moral than themselves by their leaders. For example, followers of the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray do not hesitate to attack on moral grounds movie goers of *"Fire"* (the film dealing with lesbianism) or burn the stores selling Valentine Day cards. These are considered morally degenerate behaviours and therefore the action of the Shiv Sena justified. People high in authoritarianism would thus feel especially free to aggress and express their prejudices against supposedly immoral elements.

In a recent study done by Whitley (1999) it was found that the nature of the prejudice expressed by authoritarians against, for example, minority groups, would tend to be more emotional. In other words authoritarians would seem more likely to dislike outgroups rather merely oppose them or be indifferent to them. This dislike is aroused by the negative statements and stereotypes of the leaders against outgroups. Furthermore, the dislike can be easily converted into hostility and aggression against outgroups by the authoritarian followers.

Implications for the Church in India

Having presented the research findings on the authoritarian personality, it would now be appropriate to consider some of the implications of these findings for the Church in India. These implications will be drawn out by viewing the Church from a twofold perspec-

tive: a) Church as a social organization; b) Church as a community of faith.

a) Church as a social organization

The Church as a social organization has a leadership structure that is strictly hierarchical and strongly vertical in its functioning. Hence, the most frequent mode of decision-making is unilateral rather than multilateral, sometimes consultative but rarely democratic. The authority figure almost always has the last word. However, minimal accountability is required of the leadership vis-à-vis the faithful.

A top down hierarchical structure, as described above, tends to foster authoritarian leaders. These leaders would be characterized by qualities of rigidity, dogmatism and conservatism in their functioning. They would feel the need to maintain the very structure that has placed them in exalted positions of power and decision-making. In other words, the authoritarian structures within the Church would tend to nurture authoritarian leaders. A change in the status quo would seem more like a threat than an opportunity to adapt to new needs and concerns of the faithful. Hence, conservatism and conventionalism would tend to become the norm for governance. Traditions and customs are less likely to be called into question even when outmoded and irrelevant; under the pretext that changes could cause scandal or disturb the faith of the people, a regime of strict discipline and order takes precedence over flexibility and adaptability.

Furthermore, authoritarian leaders tend to exhibit aggression by condemn-

ing or punishing those violating suppos-edly conventional values and norms. This seems particularly true in areas concerning doctrine and the moral-sexual behaviours of the faithful. Aggression is also exhibited by demanding complete submission from the followers. Obedience is presented as a cherished virtue while critical thinking is viewed with suspicion and skepticism. Thus, while the obedient are rewarded and praised for "preserving the faith", the critical tend to be condemned for their lack of loyalty. Interestingly, since authoritarian leaders have in turn to be submissive to those above them in the hierarchy, the whole system is reinforced from within holding at bay any forces that may seek to intervene and demand changes.

b) Church as a community of faith

As mentioned earlier, more than others, authoritarians tend to view the world in terms of outgroups and ingroups. Within this framework, authoritarian Church leaders would tend to consider the outgroup, e.g. the "non-Christians" or even non-conforming Christians, as hostile and a possible source of threat to their structures. The present wave of Hindu fundamentalist activities in the country would only serve to reinforce the negative stereotypes of authoritarian Church leaders about the outgroup and reassert a subtle superiority of the ingroup. Examples of recent Church documents like *Dominus Jesus* and *Ecclesia in Asia*, would seem to present the world-view and mission of one's ingroup as the desirable norm for all. The strong reactions of many non-Christians in India to the Church's

teachings in these documents demonstrate amply the kind of hostility that can be generated by authoritarian leaders and their structures. Interestingly, though authoritarian leaders frequently assert their belief in dialogue it is almost always on their terms and not in a spirit of equality and mutuality.

While there is no denying that the recent atrocities against Christians by Hindu fundamentalists deserve to be condemned, authoritarian leaders would tend to attribute all the causes for violence exclusively to the outgroup. There seems to be an extreme reluctance on the part of Church leaders to assess also the role of the ingroup in contributing to the situation. The tendency to denigrate outgroups by perpetuating stereotypes is not uncommon.

As stated earlier, rigidity in thinking often characterizes authoritarian leaders. Repeated assertions of dogmas/teachings are used to justify such rigidity in the name of orthodoxy. Purity of thought is given high priority as it is believed that outgroups should not be permitted to dilute the true teachings of the Church. As is clear, such an attitude can easily lead to an obsession with orthodoxy which is a skip and a jump away from fundamentalism. Authoritarian leaders welcome fundamentalist thinking because it tends to be simple, straight forward and absolute. With such a mindset it is believed that it is easier to sway the masses and also demand unquestioned obedience. Orthodoxy of thinking is also closely associated with orthodoxy of expression and language. Language is carefully monitored by the authorities, such that important terms

and concepts are defined in fixed ways with no room for deviation. The fear of relativism and syncretism become watchwords to be used to curb any kind of accommodation with the outgroups. Inculturation and inter-religious dialogue would tend to become the first victims of such fundamentalist thinking on the part of authoritarian Church leaders.

Closely associated with rigid and fundamentalist thinking in the Church are also issues related to gender. Not only are women excluded from ordination to the priesthood but are effectively excluded from any significant role in the male-dominated ruling hierarchy of the Church. In effect, women would become an outgroup to authoritarian Church leaders thereby frequently becoming the object of prejudice and discrimination based on gender. Of course, the male leadership would be at pains to distance itself from and deny such a state of affairs, but the reality on the ground speaks otherwise. Though authoritarian Church leaders do speak out strongly in favour of equality and human rights, they tend to apply other kinds of norms to justify the subservient role of women in the Catholic Church. It would seem that such cognitive resistance is easily maintained and supported by an authoritarian leadership; furthermore, it is striking that debate on such an important issue that touches the lives of 50% of the faithful is simply forbidden by an authoritarian leadership.

Concluding remarks

This brief article has sought to highlight the most recent research on the syndrome of the authoritarian personality in psychology. Though the concept was brought to light some fifty years ago, its relevance is felt even to this day. It is hoped that applying the findings of this research to present-day authoritarian structures will signal the imminent dangers lying in wait for the Church in India.

Given that the country as a whole is gripped in certain sections by a fundamentalist wave, the leadership of the Church in India would be better off if it has recourse to non-authoritarian patterns of leadership; these would no doubt enhance its credibility and efficacy. There is no denying that the heavy investment of the Church in India in human services is most laudatory and salutary. However, much of it may come to naught if the authoritarian leadership does not pay sufficient heed to the warnings coming out of this kind of research.

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