

# **The Christian God and Human Authority: A Theological Exploration with Reference to Africa's Principal Worldviews<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Addressing the African Crisis of Traditional and Modern Authorities**

From all sides we hear that the authorities of sub-Saharan Africa are involved in deep crisis. Traditional authorities are rapidly losing influence; while at the same time newly imported forms of authority oscillate between powerlessness and power-abuse. Despite international pressure towards democratisation, governments exercise their power along authoritarian and sometimes dictatorial patterns. In order to gain the international respectability they need, they tend to accept democracy, but only in as far as they are forced, as little as possible and without any real conviction. Yet, their authoritarian behaviour is only equalled by their inability to influence what is going on in their vast territories, which lack adequate governmental structures. In the experience of many, nothing is functioning as it used to; yet, no clear or stable alternative is emerging.

The churches are working hard to offer a positive contribution and to address the questions their governments are facing (i.e. Bediako '95; J.K.N. Mugambi (ed.) '97). Yet, with regards to their own structures of authority the churches are as much a part of the crisis as are the other authorities, both in the lack and the abuse of authority (Messi Metogo '97, 171s, 212s).

Complaints about the lack and the abuse of authority are of course ageless, but the political and ecclesiastical realities of contemporary Africa

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justify speaking of a genuine crisis. In this situation it is natural to search for healthy examples. Africans can look with nostalgia to their pre-colonial past, in which human relationships were so much clearer. Africans south of the Sahara can look to the North, where Muslim governments and societies appear more stable. If we did not see this ourselves, Muslim propaganda will tell those not yet in their sphere of influence about the goodness of Islamic law. The West of course remains a major attraction for Africans, both for its affluence and its peace. If Africans themselves are not attracted to the western way of organising society, the West will impose itself both through western controlled international organisations and through its media and economic power. Along side these three major spheres of influence in contemporary Africa, namely tradition, Islam and (post)modernity,<sup>2</sup> Christianity is also a major force, with deep roots in Africa's past and its vibrant recent history.

Christians have a unique understanding of authority, grounded in their unique understanding of God as they have met Him in Jesus Christ. The thesis of this article is that starting from their knowledge of God, Christians have a unique and healthy contribution to make in addressing the African crisis of authority. As a Christian serving for some time on this continent and participating in its life, I want to contribute my part. This basic idea, that a Christian understanding and practice of authority follows from a Christian understanding of God, can be argued for in at least three ways.

- (1) First of all, this relationship is fundamental to *biblical theology*. The two Testaments consider the imitation of God and Jesus Christ to be a central criterion for knowing how to live according to the will of God, and a decisive motivation to live accordingly (Lev 19:2-4; Mk 19:43-45; Jn 15:12; Eph 5:1; Grenz '97, 100, 114-117; Kaiser '83, 29s). In the same way, the Scriptures consider the "renewal of our minds" a key to the renewal of our lives and communities. Only if we start viewing things in the right way, in the light of God's character, purpose and redemptive actions, will we be able to discover the will of God for our lives and communities and to live accordingly (Ro 12:2; Php 1:9s).

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<sup>2</sup> Despite major differences between modernity and postmodernity, in this paper I discuss them together, because in comparison to the other worldviews discussed in this paper they clearly stem from the same root, as is shown particularly in their conceptions of authority. "Postmodernism retains a number of elements that characterised modernism: ... It repudiates all external, objective, transcendent authority" (Henry '95, 48).

- (2) From the perspective of *cultural anthropology*, research has revealed a close relationship between the morality of a particular culture and its worldview (Geertz '93; Kraft '96, 419). We will see that this relationship is not unique to Christianity; the worldviews and theologies of African Traditional Religion, Islam and (post)modernity equally correspond to their respective understanding and practice of authority.
- (3) From the perspective of *systematic analysis*, the relationship between authority and worldview is seen from both ends of the relationship. A worldview as a comprehensive perspective on reality encompasses basic beliefs concerning what is ultimately good, concerning the nature of evil and concerning the ultimate goal of history. These beliefs have direct implications for the understanding of what are considered worthy and healthy goals of action and valuable and healthy social structures.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, if authority should be distinguished from the exercise of brute force, it needs to search for a legitimisation outside itself in the way things are supposed to be. Even the idea that authority is based on a democratic consensus of free individuals presupposes a certain worldview.

This article aims first of all to uncover the internal structure and particular logic of the Christian understanding of authority by linking it to its source in the Christian doctrine of God and his relationship to humanity. As such it necessarily abstracts from the great historical variety in the Christian practice of authority, which has been influenced by many more factors, historical, cultural and social, rather than by the Christian concept of God alone. Yet, the fact that the Christian concept of God is and should be a major determinant of the Christian practice of authority legitimises this abstraction. Secondly, this specific Christian understanding will be compared with concepts of God and authority in African Traditional Religion, Islam and (post)modernism, for it is these three worldviews, together with the Christianity, that are competing for the African mind, the African soul and African society. With regard to these worldviews we will for the same reasons concentrate more on their internal structure and logic than on the variety of historical expressions.

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<sup>3</sup> Following authors like MacIntyre ('85<sup>2</sup>) and O'Donovan ('86), this statement goes against the grain of a strong a priori of many contemporary ethicists that you can never derive an "ought" from an "is".

Understanding the way in which the conception of authority and the doctrine of God are related will be of value in the four following areas.

- (1) The first gain is *hermeneutical*. If we understand the coherence of God's character and the divine ideal for the practice of authority, we will be better equipped for understanding and interpreting the great variety of biblical passages touching on authority. Understanding the inner logic of the Christian understanding of authority will help us view the variety and richness of the biblical data as referring to and sprouting from one and the same divine character and will. This hermeneutical perspective will also help us to apply and live the message shining through this variety of biblical expressions.
- (2) The second gain is *contextual*. The contextualisation of the biblical message does not only concern the highlighting of the continuities between Christian ideas and those found elsewhere. It should also point out the particularity of Christian ideas and ideals and their discontinuity with what is found in the context in which it is lived and proclaimed. In the African context the particularity of a Christian understanding of authority should especially be shown in comparison with the conceptions of African Traditional Religion, Islam and (post)modernism. The difference of the Christian conception and practice of authority in comparison to "the authorities, principalities and powers of this age" needs to become clear, in order that the Christian gospel can really set us free from these other authorities.<sup>4</sup>
- (3) The third gain of unravelling the relationship between the Christian God and the Christian practice of authority is *apologetical*. If we understand this relationship, we will understand the corresponding comprehension of authority to be well founded as following from our belief in God.
- (4) For the same reason, tracing the Christian understanding of authority back to the Christian revelation of God is highly *motivational* for Christians. Can we conceive of a better motivation to practice what we believe to be a Christian understanding of authority, than the knowledge that this practice imitates God Himself and is the only adequate response to Him as we know Him in Christ?

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<sup>4</sup> The importance of the Pauline language concerning "principalities", "powers", "dominions" and "authorities" has been shown by authors like Walter Wink ('84) and Lesslie Newbigin ('89, 198ss) to be talking at the same time about spiritual powers and social structures and ideas that hold human beings asunder.

To understand the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of authority we will first of all turn to the Scriptures from which we will show how the biblical conception and practice of authority differed from its environment and specifically so because of its particular understanding of God. We will see how the radical distinction between the Creator and his creation proper to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures results in the desacralisation and relativisation of all human authority.

In the second section this biblical idea will form the starting point for a comparison with and a critique of the traditional African conceptions of authority, which tend to consider human authorities as sacred and therefore absolute and incontestable.

The comparison in the third major section concentrates on modern and postmodern conceptions of authority. These positions are completely opposite to the traditional African ideas. That is, in the name of human autonomy, all authorities are not only desacralised, but completely separated from any idea of a divine justice and order. From a Christian perspective such isolation of human authority is destructive to human community and life itself.

In comparison to the traditional African conception on the one hand and the (post)modern conception on the other hand, the Muslim theology and practice of authority resembles most closely the Christian understanding. Nevertheless, in the fourth section we will show that both religious traditions have radically different conceptions of God and that it is exactly from their different doctrines of God that the differences in their ideals and actual practices of authority can be understood.

I end with some concluding observations, showing how the revelation of the character of God in Christ has profound implications for the way in which we exercise authority. As in many other areas, the Christian practice of authority may help us experiment and should help us show the liberating power of the Gospel in relation to all sorts of oppressive human authorities.

## **2. The Absolute Distinction between God and Humanity according to the Scriptures and the Subsequent Desacralisation of all Human Authorities**

One of the decisive points that distinguished the biblical faith from the surrounding world was the way in which it conceived of the one God, Yahweh, as the Creator of the universe. According to the myths of the peoples surrounding Israel (for example the Egyptians and the Babylonians) the origin of the cosmos was described as a “cosmogony”. This is the type of myth in which the sea, the earth, the heavens, human beings and the gods all originate from one and the same original substance, which they continue to share (van Leeuwen '64, 55s). The Bible, in contrast, considers God to be absolutely distinct from creation, including human beings. While God is eternal and exists by Himself, the world is created out of nothing by the word of God and therefore has no other origin than the will of God (Ge 1:1-3; Jn 1:3). This distinction implies an absolute sovereignty of God over against his creation (Isa 45:9).

The Dutch missiologist and theologian Arend van Leeuwen has shown that the contrast between these two worldviews had profound implications for the corresponding conceptions of political authority. In the Ancient Near East, political authority was considered sacred. In Egypt the Pharaoh was thought to be the incarnation of the divine sun god Re. Among the Babylonians the king was not divine himself, but he was the direct representative of the gods<sup>5</sup> and he had an important cultic function in maintaining the cosmic order to which both men and the gods belonged. Because of the sacred character of his kingship and his indispensability for the maintenance of cosmic harmony, this political authority could never be seriously criticised. It was extremely difficult to displace a malfunctioning sovereign and if it did happen he would be exchanged for a member of his extended family. The people never questioned the legitimacy of the authority of the monarch as such, for this was an indispensable part of the sacred and necessary cosmic order (van Leeuwen '64, 82ss).

In Israel, however, the establishment of a monarchy was far from evident, as is shown by the argument between Samuel and the Israelites concerning the possibility and the desirability of this institution. The people

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<sup>5</sup> As such the king both in Babylon and Egypt was often called the “image of God”, an expression which in the Hebrew Scriptures is applied to all men, male and female, without distinction (Blocher '84, 86s).

wished to have a king “like all the nations” (1Sa 8:5), but this request is considered an insult to the God of Israel, who is its one and only King (1Sa 8:8). Samuel explained that even if God gave them a king, this king should not be like the pagan kings. As Samuel underlined, this king would not be above criticism. The king should obey his God, who remains the only one who is King by nature, and if the earthly representative did not obey, he would be judged like his people (1Sa 12:14s, 25). This desacralisation of political authority had important implications for the attitude towards the king as we encounter it in the Old Testament. Against the tendency among the kings to usurp cultic functions, the prophets and the priests would make constant efforts to guard their independence as representatives of God vis-à-vis the monarchy. When Saul immolated a sacrifice in order to gain the favour of God for his battle against the Philistines, this was a major reason for God rejecting his kinship (1Sa 13:8-14). The king Jeroboam was condemned for the installation of two cultic centres at Dan and Bethel, meant to be a cult to the God of Israel they had served before, but a cult that would support the reign of Jeroboam (1Ki 12:26-13:10). For the author of the books of Kings the expression “the sins of Jeroboam” was precisely used to indicate this cult in Dan and Bethel linked to the northern monarchy. It was the main criterion for judging the kings coming after him (f. ex. 2Ki 10:31; 13:6).

Prophecy was not a phenomenon limited to Israel, but the prophets in the surrounding countries were by and large prophets of the royal courts, as you could also find diviners and astrologers in the royal entourage (cf. Ge 41:18; 1Ki 18:19; Jer 27:3, 9 Da 2:2; 4:15; 5:7). The Israelite kings also had their court-prophets, but the writers of the Old Testament knew too well that court-prophets would have no inclination to criticise their kings. These prophets would naturally give mainly messages which would please their masters and benefactors (1Ki 22:5-28; Jer 23:9-40; cf. Goldingay '94, 47-57). In distinction from these court-prophets there was a long tradition of independent prophets, who had the courage to criticise the authorities even at the risk of their lives. Elijah, Amos and Jeremiah are impressive examples of prophets who challenged the sacred character of the authority the kings liked to usurp. These prophets demanded that their kings obey the laws of the only sovereign God and use their authority for the benefit of their people. It is the messages of the prophets of this tradition, which were incorporated in the biblical canon, and it is these prophets we believe to be the mouth of God the Creator.

In the New Testament we find the same desacralisation of human authorities. If there is only one God and if Jesus is proclaimed as the only Lord (2Co 8:5s), this implies intrinsically a criticism of all the others who call themselves god or lord, including the Roman emperor himself. As the pagan kings in the Ancient Near East had done, the Roman emperors had begun to demand that they be worshipped as gods and so to declare their authority sacred, absolute and incontestable. It was precisely because of the refusal of the early Christians to worship the emperor as god, that they were persecuted (cf. Plinius, *Letters*, X, 96). All of the subjects of the Roman Empire were allowed to have their own gods. The only condition was that they would not because of that refuse to participate in the imperial cult, for such a refusal was considered an expression of civil disobedience. The early Christian Apologists made a serious effort to show that Christians were respectable citizens (i.e. *The Epistle to Diognetus*). From a Christian perspective they were indeed respectable citizens, but the defenders of the Roman State were right when they considered the Christian refusal to worship the emperor to be a radical assault on his authority! In fact, if the emperor was no longer considered divine and became a human being like all the others under his jurisdiction, he would no longer be above criticism and one could start making him accountable and asking questions about the justness of his government. The Christian refusal to worship the emperor was not simply a religious affair without any further consequences, but a time bomb against all tendencies to sacralise political authorities and to make them absolute and incontestable.

### **3. Contrast with Traditional African Theology and Practice of Authority**

What are the implications of this absolute distinction between the Creator and his creation for the development of a Christian theology and ethics of authority? We have seen that this implies that all human authority becomes relative in relation to the divine authority, which alone is absolute and that consequently all aspirations of authorities to consider themselves absolute falls under the judgement of God.

This has consequences for the evaluation of the view of authority found in African Traditional Religion.<sup>6</sup> In his illuminating article "Christian

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<sup>6</sup> I presuppose that it is legitimate to speak of "African Traditional Religion" in the singular as a religion, which notwithstanding its varieties is characterised by a common core. See MAGESA '97, 14-18. Van Leeuwen limits himself to drawing



Religion and African Social Norms: Authority, Desacralisation and Democracy”, the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako draws our attention to the fact that as in the Ancient Near East, political authority in traditional Africa was equally considered sacred, absolute and therefore incontestable (Bediako '95, 239-242). Even if a considerable number of theologians, as among others John Mbiti (Mbiti '69, 29-47; Mbiti '92<sup>2</sup>, 45-59) consider African Traditional Religion to be monotheist, the line of separation between what is divine and what is not is not clear-cut. Between the one creator and humanity there exists a host of intermediaries, who are more or less close to the creator, more or less divine and more or less sacred. This function of the intermediary is also fulfilled by certain human personalities, who because of their privileged relationship with the spirit world are themselves considered sacred. The clan-chiefs and other political authorities enter in this category (Mbiti '69, 182). This sacredness of the chief was reinforced by another dominant trait of the traditional African worldview and morality. According to traditional morality a crucial requirement for the good life was to live in harmony with the whole universe, visible and invisible, and in particular in harmony with the ancestors, which were considered the guardians of the security, the fecundity and the prosperity of the clan (Magesa '97, 46-57). The authority of the chief was based on his privileged relationship with the most important ancestors of the clan and therefore almost incontestable (Bediako '95, 241s; cf. Magesa '97, 69, 245s, 252, 266). The difficulty of replacing someone occupying this crucial place in the universe of mystical relations is shown by the example of the Nyoro of Uganda, where a failing king could only be replaced by another if he either committed suicide or was killed (Magesa '97, 257). Placide Tempels expressed classically:

The eldest of a group or of a clan is, for Bantu, by Divine law the sustaining link of life, binding ancestors and their descendants. [...] The true chief [...] is the source of zestful living, he is God himself.” (Tempels '59, 62s)

The novel *Waiting for Rain* by Charles Mungoshi from Zimbabwe ('75) shows how the relationship with the ancestors renders authority effectively incontestable, in this case on the level of the extended family. Lucifer, the main character of the novel, returns to his natal village after his studies, only to depart anew for further studies and this time in Europe.

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out illuminating parallels between the Ancient Near East and contemporary conceptions of authority related to the great religions of East.

During this visit many conflicts develop and they all converge in a seance in which an aunt of the family functions as a medium to ask for the guidance of the ancestors. You sense that after the ancestors have spoken, there is no possibility for disagreement, except if one wants to pay the price of placing oneself entirely outside the community. A further penalty is added in the form of a bad conscience for having disrupted the harmony of the family and for having called terrible maledictions on them. The appeal to the ancestors, whether it be done honestly or as manipulation, effectively renders human authority almost absolute and incontestable.

For Bediako the sacredness and incontestability of authority is not only in Africa's past, but accompanies the African understanding today. According to his analysis one of the main causes of the difficulty African leaders and their entourage have in ceding power to a successor is precisely this sentiment related to authority. Because authority is considered sacred, it can not be given up when acquired, unless by force or major constraint (Bediako '95, 236s, 242). The behaviour of many African presidents supports this thesis.<sup>7</sup> We could equally point to the view and practice of authority as we encounter it in many African churches. As soon as someone becomes a pastor, an elder or a president of a denomination or para-church organisation, this person tends to consider this position as a given, an incontestable attainment. It become difficult to accept criticism of ones functioning and even more to understand that one is not pastor of a certain church, elder or president for life, but that at a certain time it is good to leave one's place to another. Far too often the exercise of the mission of the church and the work of our Lord is hindered because one finds leaders who can no longer accept good council, or understand that at a certain time they can leave their post to others without being ashamed.

With regard to the retarding or even the blocking of the development of African democracy, society and economy through the tendency to render political authorities absolute, Bediako considers the proclamation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Lamin Sanneh attributes the tendency of African politics to render political authority absolute to the influence of Western ideas on the absolute authority of the state, which the African elite adopted under the influence of colonialism, which made "these elites [...] ineffective modernist brokers to their people" (Sanneh '96, 86). While this may be one factor among others, because of the "relatively superficial nature of the assimilation of these new African elites" noted by Sanneh himself (*ibid.*), it is difficult to conceive this influence as more important than the African heritage itself.

Gospel an indispensable contribution for escaping from this blind alley. It is the Christian faith that will desacralise human authority in relationship to the absolute authority belonging to God alone. Only when we begin to understand that all human authority is relative can democracy make progress in Africa, according to Bediako, for democracy presupposes that political authorities can be criticised and replaced, an idea which has been difficult to accept by Africans until today (Bediako '95, 243-249). The church does not need to defend democracy as the only ethical form of government, to make clear how other forms of government need the corrective of the desacralisation of authority. In Ancient Israel it was the monarchy, which was desacralised, and the same prophetic witness needs to be heard today if governments are democratically elected or not. Without the church imposing itself in the area of politics in which she is not specialised, she can make an extremely important contribution by reminding the leaders of the nations that they are human beings like all of us. She should remind them that they are accountable to the one and only God and to their fellow human beings for the way they exercise their authority and that they can, when the time comes, make place for others.

For this reminder by the church to the political leaders to have any weight, we must start with the desacralisation of the ecclesiastical authorities themselves. Being a religious authority does not make church authorities an exception to the rule of all human authority being relative. If there is something sacred, it is shared by all believers who share in the universal priesthood (1Pe 2:9). Church leaders and pastors do not have a privileged access to God, as the former chiefs and priests were considered having in relation to the spirit-world, nor a privileged access to the Word of God. It is therefore that church-leaders are not only accountable to God, but also to the body of Christ consisting of all believers, even if this idea does not come naturally because of the living African past. This does not make the church a democracy, ruled by autonomous individuals. The Church is ruled by the Word. But the decisive discovery of the protestant Reformation is still valuable: the Word of God is given to all believers and not only to those ordained in special ministries. If the authority in the Church is a functional division rather than an ontological distinction between people, those in power can no longer consider their functions as rights for life.

It is worth noting that the African tradition is not only a burden in certain respects, but also a treasure in other respects. In the African tradition there have been two ways of considering and practising authority,

two lines which were almost always found together with sometimes the accent falling more to one side, sometimes more to the other. Next to the view of absolute and incontestable authority and sometimes in tension with this view, there are also community-based and egalitarian elements in the understanding and practice of authority. There was the practice in which major sectors of the community participated in the palavers aimed at consensual decisions to which the whole community could assent.<sup>8</sup> Because of its concern for the maintaining of community, practices were elaborated to search for reconciliation, when the community was disrupted (i.e. Magesa '97, 269ss). These lines of the African tradition could be explored, reoriented, supported and reinforced from a Christian perspective of authority.<sup>9</sup> The wisdom developed in the practice of the search for such a consensus can enrich us today and not only in Africa.

#### **4. Contrast with (Post)Modern "Theology" and Practice of Authority**

Contemporary Africa is no longer the Africa of 80, 40 or even 20 years ago. In order to understand and respond to the problems relating to the practice of authority in Africa today, we cannot limit ourselves to an analysis of Africans past, nor wish to enclose Africa in its past, as certain anthropologists seem to prefer.<sup>10</sup> Today's Africa is in a process of radical change through its confrontation with the cultural influences from the West or more precisely the North-Atlantic culture. This culture we may call "modernity", but we also need to reckon with influences more properly labelled "postmodern". I need to limit myself to a few sketchy remarks.

Modernity is mostly used as the label for the culture developed in Europe since the 18th century Enlightenment period. It is characterised by a strong belief in the autonomy of the human subject. As the human being is

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Magesa '97, 267: "Throughout Africa generally, the moral legitimation of government and leadership depends to a large extent on the capacity of the leader(s) to listen. The enforcement of law and social order is basically an exercise in listening and must be seen within this context."

<sup>9</sup> This remains true, even when we realise that without the introduction of the desacralisation of authority a consensus can be forced and can be based on a suppression of dissent, as noted by Bediako ('95, 236-238).

<sup>10</sup> See Messi Metogo '97, 193s for a wider criticism of this tendency to limit Africa to its past.

no longer prepared to accept any authority above himself,<sup>11</sup> atheism is a natural child of modernity (cf. Avis '95). The modern concept of authority therefore generally left no place for an absolute divine authority limiting the human being. When it continued to accept a god, it generally adapted an image of god, which did not imply a limitation or relativisation of human autonomy.<sup>12</sup> In modernity itself human autonomy was, however, considered limited in a certain way because it was structured by a natural ethics, to be discovered by natural and autonomous reason, which determined what was good and just. However, in time this idea of being able to find a natural ethic by reason alone without the help of divine revelation proved to be more and more an illusion. The rejection of biblical revelation by autonomous reason ended therefore in the renunciation of all hope to find a universal moral structure to reality and a universally valid natural ethic. In this way modernity is nowadays followed by new developments that we call post-modern (Lyotard '84; Middleton & Walsh '95; Grenz '95). The idea of human autonomy is generally maintained, but in this new setting there is no longer any metaphysical limit to the authority and liberty that the individual appropriates. Happily there are many values we share in our post-modern society, but we accept them because of our common history and because we need them to manage our communities, but not because of any metaphysical order, which earlier was supposed to encompass our individual lives.

The influence of these ideas in Africa is evident. Traditionally the radius of human action in authority and under authority was strictly limited by the perception of the universe. Reality was conceived to have a fixed structure, in which humanity and the non-human, those in authority and those under authority, the visible and the invisible all participated and which gave the human being his due place. Today in many areas of life and particularly in the in the quest for personal gain and in the exercise of authority there are few limitations left, particularly for Africans living in a modern urban setting and particularly for those who dominate. As a consequence the exercise of authority not constrained by any transcendent legitimising and critical structure easily tends to be reduced to a question of

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<sup>11</sup> Here the masculine pronoun is in place, for the autonomous thinking and mastering subject of the Enlightenment has strongly masculine characteristics.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth's concept of the "*Verbürgerlichung*", the "becoming bourgeois", or the domestication of the Gospel by modern culture is in this respect a revealing analytical tool (Barth '57, §26.2).

sheer power. Where many western authorities feel constrained by the values developed in western history as for example those related to human rights and social concern, we should not be wondered that many African authorities did not deeply interiorise this strain of the western cultural tradition. The West they encountered generally was not one of human equality and social concern. All this leaves us with the outcome that in Africa the influence of the destabilising strands of modernity and post-modernity on the structures of authority has been much stronger than in the West itself.

This concept of authority without limits in the structures of reality is, however, far from biblical. Life, according to the Old Testament, is structured by an order established by God the Creator Himself. God created the universe according to his will and living in accordance with this structure is beneficial for the individual, for the community and for non-human creation (Dt 32:47; O'Donovan '86, 188-190). Where modern African leaders opt for a liberty from all moral structures that might "define" (and thus limit) their authority, the church needs to show that such an exercise of power is inhuman and self-destructive. The church further needs to follow the prophets in speaking up for the weakest in society like the single mothers and their families, who are most easily forgotten when authority and power become confounded. We need to have the courage to proclaim the Gospel, which also implies that recognition of God's supreme authority and his will for his creation is beneficial and sets us free for a better life (O'Donovan '86, 151-156). The ministry of the church is not only to desacralise authorities that declare themselves sacred. She should also show the need for human authorities to recognise the supreme authority of God and his will for his creation and even the need to recognise human authorities established by Him.

### **5. Contrast with Islamic theology and practice of authority**

The growing influence of Islam in Africa implies that we also need to consider what is proper to the Christian understanding of authority in comparison to the Muslim understanding. This comparison is particularly necessary because of the growing influence of Islam, often in its more militant forms, in African countries with a strong Christian presence, like Nigeria, Chad, Sudan and Malawi. In these situations the easiest reaction would be to follow Muslim examples of ways to defend one's rights and maybe to impose one's will. Should the following of Islamic practice of

propagating, defending and imposing its authority be considered a legitimate answer or rather a temptation?

At first sight the Islamic and Christian concepts of authority have much in common. If we do not see this by taking Western secular understandings of authority, political and other, as Christian, we will have no sound basis for dialogue, collaboration and if necessary resistance (cf. Sanneh '96, 113). For both religions all human authority is relative with regards to the only absolute authority as the prerogative of the sovereign God (*Koran*, Sura VII, 54). In the *Sunna*, the tradition, one finds a saying of Mohammed that shows the possibility of criticising the human authorities now rendered relative: "The best holy war is the word of truth spoken to an unjust ruler." (Ghazali '94, 199) Although Christians tend to distinguish more than Muslims between the religious community and the state, both religions agree that the will of God is normative for all of life. Neither Muslims, nor Christians distinguish in that respect between the society in general and religious institutions, because for both God is the Creator and Sovereign over the entire universe.

However, one can still perceive a general difference in the practice of authority between predominantly Muslim countries on the one hand and countries with a more Christian population on the other hand. The political ideals of Muslim groups and Christian groups reveal important differences and this remains true even if one recognises the great variety within both religious traditions. In general, Muslim religious and political leaders have more of a tendency to aim at the imposition of Islam and Islamic law and to confound political and religious authority, whereas Christians tend more to separate church and state and to promote religious freedom. Are these differences simply due to non-religious cultural influences? This is suggested by the fact that most European states before the 18th century had the same tendency not to respect religious freedom nor the distinction between the proper spheres of church and state. At the same time a number of Muslims living in Europe and inhaling its atmosphere are opting now for the occidental model of organising religious groups in a pluralist society.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it would be all too unjust to compare a Christian ideal with the

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<sup>13</sup> The varieties in the Islamic world community are even greater: Muslims in societies with a "primal" religious background, as in Africa, may tend more to a sacralisation of human authorities, while Muslims in some Asian countries may tend to a more mystical and personalised Islam.

reality of lived Islam and then to conclude that the Christian ideal is preferable. In both religious traditions we find laudable ideals and corrupt practices, which contradict these ideals. Does this mean that finally different practices of authority in these two religions have no other roots than social, cultural and historical ones? My contention is that there are traits of the two different conceptions of God and religion that suggest that at least in part these cultural differences and these differing conceptions of authority have religious roots. It is these religious roots that adherents of both traditions will want to treat with utter seriousness, because of their common recognition that our understanding of the nature of God and of his relationship to humanity should be foundational and normative for our understanding of human living. It seems to me that the Christian understanding of the nature of God and the Christian life contains more elements that can nourish a sound and liberating theology and practice of authority, than the other tradition. In this respect there are at least five considerations worth our attention.

First, there is the separation of political and religious authority. Even if Moses combined both domains of authority in one and the same person, the biblical tradition shows how later on the prophets and often even the priests needed to take an independent stand vis-à-vis the monarchy. The Koranic canon culminates in and ends with the concentration of all power, political and religious, in the hands of Mohammed. This difference is of course normative for both religious traditions.

But we can take a further step. Secondly, this difference is not simply an historical contingency, but is also related to two different conceptions of the relation between the religious and the political spheres of life. In Islamic theology it is difficult to conceive of a fundamental difference between the two spheres. The religious community and the political authority both have the responsibility to promote obedience to Allah, the sovereign King of the universe. In the Christian tradition, particularly in its Protestant forms, a distinction was made between two different functions of these two different structures, the church and the state. Developing Romans 13, which gives to the state the so-called "power of the sword" to punish wrongdoers, the state, also the Christian state, was assigned the responsibility to maintain social justice and order by making an effort *to contain and to limit evil*. In this view the state is an emergency structure,



provoked by the reality of sin.<sup>14</sup> Yet, in punishing evil, one can contain evil and limit its growth, but one can never *overcome* it in that way. We can only overcome evil in responding to evil with good and by blessing those who curse us (Ro 12:20s). This is exactly the lifestyle promoted by the church as followers of the example of Jesus himself. If this is the only way to *overcome* evil, we need in this age at the same time a structure to *contain* evil, for otherwise evil could propagate itself unhindered. The idea and ideal that in our love for our neighbour we should be prepared to suffer unjustly in order to overcome evil is central to the New Testament. This idea is absent and even hardly conceivable in Islam.

In the third place we should also note that the difference between the two religions uncovered thus far is linked with and based upon a more fundamental difference between the two conceptions of God and his relationship with human beings. As we know, the basic metaphor to express the relationship between the God of the Koran and human beings is the relationship between a master and his slaves or a sovereign king and his subjects. Islam is the religion of total submission to the will of Allah, whom all men should obey as his slaves or servants. The word "Islam" itself refers to this submission, a "Muslim" being someone who submits himself.<sup>15</sup> The key metaphor to understanding the relationship between the God of the Bible and human beings, however, is the relationship between a father and his children, a relationship between a husband and his spouse or a relationship between friends. It is true that this God also has the *right* to our service as his slaves (Lk 17:10), yet his aim is that we live as his sons and daughters (Gal 4:7), as friends (Jn 15:15) and as his bride (Rev 19:7). What concerns us here is a major difference between these two sets of relationships. A king or a master may force the obedience of their subjects

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<sup>14</sup> See for example *The Westminster Confession* XXIII.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Koran* itself "Islam" is used as the name of the religion proclaimed by Mohammed (Sura III, 17; V, 5). The translation of Islam as "submission" is dominant among Muslims (Sherif '95, 117s; du Pasquier, 18; Kateregga & Shenk '80, 59; cf. Sourdel '96, 407). Others also translate it as "total surrender to God" (Gardet & Jornier, "Islam", 171b). This, however, does not change a lot in the perception of the relationship between God and man as explained by the basic Koranic metaphors for God of King, Lord and Master. It is true that even from early on a more mystical interpretation of the Koran developed, giving another meaning to Islam as "surrender". From a Christian perspective this may be conceived a positive development, but its origins in the *Koran* seem to me too limited to interpret orthodox Islam from this perspective.

or slaves. A father, however, can never force the love of his children, as Jesus' parable of the prodigal son shows, when that father accepts the painful departure of his son (Lk 15:11ss). A husband can never force the love of his spouse, as the prophet Hosea experienced, when he had to marry an unfaithful wife, who left him, thus modelling the love of God for a people rejecting him (Hos 1 & 2). We can never force others to be our friends, no matter how much we would like. In these situations love can be shown and offered, but the response necessarily remains free.

The fact that a master through his faithful servants can force the obedience and service of the unfaithful seems to me to imply that the *jihad*, the holy war, is a concept, which naturally relates to it. Certain modern Muslims, e.g. Badru Kateregga from Uganda, wish to eliminate the idea of a holy war (Kateregga & Shenk '80, 76s). This is a laudable effort, which can be supported by the Koranic verse: "No compulsion is there in religion" (Sura II, 256). Yet, the idea that there is no compulsion in religion, though true, seems to me incoherent with more fundamental lines of the Koranic understanding of religion. If the other servants do not obey, obedience to the master naturally implies that one tries to force others to obey. The question as to whether the obedience is wholehearted or enforced is not unimportant, but it is secondary. They remain servants and nothing more. It is natural that a good Muslim will try to promote obedience to Allah with all possible means, through the *jihad* of the word, but equally through the *jihad* by military, political or economic power. (Djaber Eldjazaïri '85, 367s; Sura VIII, 39). If the Christian envisages to the contrary that all human beings love God as children, friends and as a spouse does, they can never force this love, neither physically, nor economically, nor psychologically. They can only use the means God himself preferred for this goal: the word, persuasion, the manifestation of love itself, patiently waiting (Mt 21:33-40; 23:37). If we consider that the responsibility of the Christian state is to contain and limit evil, it can deploy force for this specific and limited purpose. If it is the vocation of the church to invite everyone to enter the Kingdom of God and to become his children, his friends and his bride, the church "only" has the power of the Word and the Spirit. She constantly needs to avoid that even her use of words becomes coercive and manipulative propaganda. She can use money to show the love of God, but never to buy conversions.

A fourth difference between the Islamic and Christian religious conceptions with profound implications for the understanding of human

authority is closely related to the one just developed. In both religions the justice of God is the guarantee for justice on earth and therefore also the norm for all human authority, but both religions have a markedly different understanding of the *love* of God. If Allah loves, it is a love for those who obey him (Sura II, 3; Kateregga & Shenk '80, 5). It is not possible to say that Allah *is* love, as one says of the God of the Christian Scriptures, for Allah does not love in all his relationships. He does not love idolaters. The God of the Bible *is* love (1Jn 4:8). He so loved the sinful world, that He gave his only Son to save this world (Jn 3:16). He loved us when we were still his enemies (Ro 5:8-10). His love is one, which searches what is lost (Lk 15). His love is one that suffers when rejected (Ge 6:6; Hos 11:7s; Lk 15:12). His love is a sacrificial love, that gives oneself in order to save, as God showed us supremely in the cross of Christ, which as the cross of his Son is also his own cross. It is the cross of God himself, for the suffering of the Son does not leave the Father unaffected. If God suffered in Christ to save us, to show his glory and to establish his kingly authority, if He humbled himself to search for us and to show his love, this should become the supreme model for all true human authority. This is the most profound reason to exercise authority in both the religious community and in the society at large in humility and service. If a Muslim should be humble before God, the King of the Universe, this might teach him to be humble and obliging before men of great standing. Before those *under* his authority, however, he should behave more like the King of the universe himself, exercising authority justly and compassionately, but without the example of service and humility. How could one ever conceive of Allah as humble and serving? However, if the God of the Bible is humble towards those whom He created and serves those who reject Him, a Christian leader can and should be humble and serve those under his authority, even without necessarily waiting for their respect and obedience as a precondition. These principles are of course more directly applicable to the exercise of authority in the Church, in which we are called to overcome evil by doing well to our enemies. Yet, even in the sphere of the state, which has as its major task to limit evil, such an attitude of love, which has no fear to imitate God in suffering unjustly for the sake of the good, can not be without consequences.

One final and fifth difference at the basis of the two religious conceptions of authority should be noted, even if most of the time this aspect remains beyond conscious perception. Islam and Christianity differ also radically in their understanding of the unity of God. For Muslims, the

unity of God is strict and indivisible; for Christians God's unity is a unity of love of three Persons, who share one and the same divine nature (Manaranche '85). And what is more, in Christian theology, we say that the fact that God is love towards human beings is based in his nature in which He is love in himself before He is love towards us. Recently two theologians, André Manaranche and Colin Gunton, noted that there exists a narrow relationship between a strict conception of the unity of God and an authoritarian understanding and practice of authority (Manaranche '85, 158-164; Gunton '97<sup>2</sup>, 21). Conversely, according to Gunton the doctrine of the Trinity is indispensable for the development of a free and just society (Gunton '97<sup>2</sup>, 168-177). We can of course not suppose a direct parallelism between the three Persons in God and the persons that make up human communities, thus ending up in separating the three divine Persons or diminishing the individuality of separate human beings. Yet God's being personal is the ontological basis of our personal existence and of our life in community as God's image, personality and living in community thus being essential to being human and not a secondary or even a deceptive element of human constitution. According to the Christian understanding, human beings can only be the image of God in community, for God himself lives in an eternal community of three persons related through mutual love (Gunton '97<sup>2</sup>, 83-99). The divine trinity is thus at the foundation of an understanding of human community in which human beings can flourish in communion with others and which is not necessarily hierarchically structured. In Islam, however, the only relationship in which God can be considered the supreme example for human relationships is the relationship between the Creator and the creature, which is a hierarchical relationship in which obedience without reservation is required. Moreover, it is in this hierarchical relationship that the human being is considered to flourish and to reach the goal of his existence. If God's authority should be considered the example of authority in human societies, a hierarchy with authoritarian tendencies is its most natural outflow.

At the end of this section, we can therefore conclude that compared to African Traditional Religion and (post)modernism, Islam in its basic features at first seems to be the most natural ally of the Christian faith with regards to its understanding of authority. Only God retains absolute authority and all human authority is derived from and depends on it. We saw that in accordance with this Mohammed encouraged Muslims to criticise human authorities in the name of God and examples of this criticism can be found in the history of Islam. However, we also saw that

Islam has no religious force comparable to the Christian faith to resist authoritarianism. The Koran does not recognise an independent religious authority over against the Islamic state. This could easily lead to a new sacralisation and absolutisation of political authority, which is at the same time the religious authority. We also saw that theologically Islam can not conceive of two a fundamental difference between the purpose of the authority of the state and the purpose of religious authority.

We discovered how at a more basic level this difference sprang from radical differences in two respective conceptions of God. If Allah is a master to be obeyed, obedience can be forced. If Allah reigns in a totalitarian manner, this is the example given to human authorities, even if it is conceded that according to Islam human beings can never have the same authority as God. If Allah is absolutely on his own in the exercise of his authority, it is this hierarchical relationship which naturally models the practice of human authority. If, on the contrary, God wants the love of human beings, the means indicated for showing and exercising authority are rather the word, persuasion and above all the showing of sacrificial love. Certainly, God is absolutely sovereign and omnipotent and often He needs to impose his will to limit the forces of evil. He has also established social structures for this specific purpose. However, his preference is a different one and it is only in responding to the preferred path of his reign through his word, his Spirit and his love, that human beings can fully flourish and attain their goal. If God humiliated and sacrificed himself in order to save us, this should be the model and the motivation to exercise authority in humility and service. If God himself is a fellowship of three Persons, the human being as his image will rather flourish in non-hierarchical relationships in the human community, which form an image of the divine archetype.

## **6. Conclusion: A Christian Theology and Practice of Authority, at the Intersection of the Dominant Worldviews of Contemporary Africa**

In his *Politics* Aristotle noted already that human conceptions of God or gods tend to reflect the political structures of the society in question: "Wherefore men say that the gods have a king, because they themselves either are or were in ancient times under the rule of a king. For they imagine, not only the forms of the gods, but their ways of life to be like their own." (I,2). In the same way we have seen how the theological ideas and the concepts of authority respectively in Christianity, African

Traditional Religion, Islam and (post)modernity are closely intertwined. This relationship between human authority is in part a consequence of the projection of our human relationships in the sphere of the gods, as in Aristotle's explanation, and in part a consequence of the search for a theological legitimisation of the authorities that be. This parallelism, however, is not necessarily a reason to criticise all theological conceptions as simple projections and legitimatisations, as it is often hastily concluded.<sup>16</sup> Different religions share the conviction that this parallelism is based on the fact that human authorities are derived from divine authority. According to the Christian tradition the parallelism can be abused to legitimise wrongly usurped authority, but God's authority has equally been a constant source, strength and motivation for a perpetual criticism of exactly those abuses of authority. It is true that men tend to make gods according to their own image, but it is equally true that from a Christian perspective this is considered idolatry. Man is rather called to destroy all false images of God and to live according to the image of God as we met Him in Jesus Christ (Ro 8:29; 2Co 3:18). Therefore, the question of the true and healthy exercise of human authority cannot be answered without answering the question of who is the true God and where do we meet Him. This question of course is largely beyond the scope of this article.<sup>17</sup> Here we have limited ourselves to the question of which conception and practice of authority is appropriate for Christians given their convictions about the nature and the revelation of God and the question of how this conception relates to the main African alternatives.

For our understanding and practice of authority to be properly Christian it should grow from a genuinely Christian understanding of God and his relationship to human beings as it has been revealed in the gospel or "good news" of Jesus Christ. Yet, notwithstanding the uniqueness of the Christian conception as a whole, it can form strategic alliances on specific points with the other African worldviews as it seeks to develop and promote a conception of authority that can help respond to the African crisis and clash of authorities. These alliances will be necessary in a continent in which Christianity will always be confronted with two or three of the other worldviews analysed. In comparison with the post modern

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<sup>16</sup> The suggestion of projection is for example strong in p'Bitek '68, 77, 112.

<sup>17</sup> We may note, however, that the coherence and the healthiness of the Christian conception of authority following from the Christian conception of God may be used as an indirect indication of the truth of the Christian conviction about the nature of God and that we meet God supremely in Christ.

denial of all fixed moral structure that should guide human behaviour and authority, it joins with African Traditional Religion in its stress of the need to live in harmony with the given order of the universe. We need to live particularly in harmony with the Creator and King of the universe, as Islam has so forcefully underlined. Yet, it joins with Islam and even more with (post)modernism in its desacralisation of all human authorities and in its suspicion of the constant tendency of authorities to absolutise and sacralise themselves. Together with Islam it defends the theocentric character of the universe and the authority of God over all aspects of life, both of what we currently call the religious domain and of what we call the secular domain.

A truly Christian theology and practice of authority, however, can never be an eclectic amalgam of what is found in other conceptions, for it originates from its particular experience of God in Christ. It is here that we find the basis of its unity, its truth, its particularity, its strength and its proper motivation. It is here that Christians in authority in Africa should look for guidance and only from here to what they might learn from their past, from the North or from the West. Here we find a basis for an understanding of authority, which confers different functions to the church and the state, though both under the supreme authority of God. Yet, God, who in his providence has granted structures to contain evil, has also sent Christ who willingly and sacrificially suffered the consequences of evil in order to conquer it. The Christian state can therefore legitimately punish evil, having received the "authority of the sword", while individual Christians are called to pardon without limit (Mt 18:22) and not to resist evil, but to love their enemies (Mt 5:39, 44). In Christ we meet a model of authority, which was recognised by his audience (Mt 7:29) and which was stronger than every resistance (Mt 8:27), yet did not impose itself, but accepted rejection, when the authority of his love and his word could not convince (Mt 26:53s). In Christ we meet a king who wants to reign as a servant and calls us to follow Him by doing the same (Mt 20:25-28). In Christ we meet a God who is love in himself in the unity of the Father and the Son (Mt 11:27), the unity and the love of whom is the origin of creation and of human existence and the ideal for the most fundamental human relationships (Jn 15:9, 12).

It has taken a lot of Christian reflection and wisdom to discover how all this should be lived out in practice, and it will take a lot of wisdom to live it out today in a multi-cultural and multi-religious world. Those questions remain beyond the scope of this article, and some might say that

this article has therefore left the most difficult questions for others to resolve. The aim which I set myself was however more modest from the beginning: to show how a Christian theology and practice of authority is based on the Christian understanding of God and his world, in what respects this understanding differs from the most important competitors in the African market of worldviews, and how Christians therefore have a specific and necessary contribution to make in responding to Africa's current crisis of authorities.

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