

ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY OPTIONS AND PATTERNS IN THE INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Who speaks for the Church? Can church authorities tell members of the church what positions to take on any given social, cultural, political or economic issue? On an issue like world peace, how can a church speak authoritatively, and what is the meaning or value of such speaking? Such are some of the questions to which this paper would like to give some attention in the context of the present practice in the Orthodox Church in India.

The Orthodox Conception of Authority - Some General Remarks

The word and concept of "authority" have their roots in the history of the western (Roman Catholic) or European Church.

Auctoritas, the Latin word from which the English word authority is derived, referred originally to *auctors*, or authors whose writings could be adduced as support to an argument in a theological *disputatio* or dispute.

This practice of citing wise men or classical writings to prove one's point seems to be as old as a literate culture, if not older. Christ himself often cited the prophets and Old Testament writings in support of his teaching, or in arguments with the Tempter or with the Scribes and Pharisees. (e.g. John: 6:45; 8:17; 10: 34 Lukose 4:8, 12, etc.). But Jesus did not lean so much on scriptural authority but on what God the Father was doing and saying.

"And Jesus answered and said to them: My teaching is not my own, but of Him who has sent me. If anyone wills to do His will, that person shall know whether this teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own." (John 7:16)

The authority of Jesus was a self - authenticating one; not legal or constitutional.

In the New Testament as a whole "authority" means something else. It is *exousia* or power to do things, to rule and direct life, to heal and to cast out demons.

"And coming forward Jesus spoke to them (the eleven Apostles) saying: To me is given all authority (*exousia*) in heaven and on earth. Go forth and teach all the nations..." (Matthew 28: 18 - 19).

This kind of authority is not academic or intellectual, but the power to rule, to teach and to perform, Jesus "taught as having power" (Mt. 7:29, Lk 4:32, Mk. 1:22, 27). A new kind of teaching, far from our present academic understanding of authority. The most manifest expressions of this authority are the power to forgive sins (Mt. (9:6, Mk. 2:10; Lk. 5:24), power to cast out demons. (Mt. 10:1, Mk. 6:7, 3:15, Lk. 9:1 etc.) and the power to heal or give life. This is the power which Jesus gave to his disciples (Lk. 9:1. 10:19) and thus to his Church. It is the

power to become children of God (John 1:12), power over the demonic forces of darkness (Mk. 16:17 ff), power to build up the church (2 Corinth. 10:8, 13:10), and power over sin and death.

This kind of authority is more important for the church, than the authority to make statements and pronouncements. And the pronouncements themselves would become more self-authenticating when accompanied by the power to forgive, the power to heal, the power to cast out demonic forces, the power to build up the community, and the power to give life.

The Conciliar Nature of Authority in the Church

When the Church had to make declarations and decisions of some significance, it is to the council of the Church and to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the early Church resorted. But this conciliar authority is often misunderstood, when seen as vested in an Episcopal Synod as an institution. The clearest example is the first Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15.

The dispute was about the role of the Law of Moses in the life of the Christian church. It was a party within the Church of Judean Christian that taught that no one can be saved without being circumcised according to the law of Moses (15:1). The Apostles and the Elders were gathered together in Council; they disputed and discussed. The ordinary lay brothers and sisters were also present presumably, because the decision to send a team to Antioch and Syria and Cilicia was taken by the "whole church with the apostles and the elders" (15:22, 23).

In fact the conciliar nature of authority was exercised not by the apostles and elders in isolation from the rest of the Church, but along with and on behalf of the whole church. Even in conciliar decrees like that of Nicea or Chalcedon, the fact that only bishops have signed the decree does not mean that bishops made decisions in isolation.

A church council, according to the Orthodox tradition, should consist of representatives of all sectors in the Church - bishops, presbyters, deacons and laity. Recent scholarship has shown that the Council of Nicea had some 3000 participants, though only around 300 bishops seem to have signed. As everyone knows, the leading theological role at the Nicean Council was played by one who was not then a bishop - the young Alexandrian deacon Athanasius. He was of course secretary to the bishop of Alexandria, but bishop's secretaries do not dominate a theological debate if only bishops had been present and deliberating. There must have been present at Nicea a very large number of presbyters, deacons and lay people, who together constituted 90% of the Council.

Conciliarity was the principle of authority in the early church. No one person had authority to speak or act for the Church. The bishop could act only with his college of presbyters and deacons, and with the consent of the whole of the Church. When the Apostles set up churches in the first century, they appointed a college of presbyters or elders with the bishop as presiding elder. Decisions were made, not by democratic majority, but by consensus in the Holy Spirit. To do all things together in conciliar community belongs to the very nature of the Church as Christ's body.

Present Practice in the Indian Church

The Orthodox Church in India had developed a polity that is in some ways more democratic than in other Eastern churches. For example, all bishops, including the Catholicos, have to be elected by an assembly with two laymen and one priest elected by each congregation in the whole church. This assembly, called the Malankara Association has thus some 3000 members of whom two-thirds are laymen. It has also a democratic set-up for managing the properties of the church and for its budget and accounts.

But official statements are usually issued by the Holy Episcopal Synod when it is in session. Very rarely, however, does the Synod of bishops so declare their minds. It may sometimes issue a statement on famine in Africa or alcoholism and temperance in India. It may even pronounce itself on property related questions like the Christian Succession Act or the Dowry System. But on burning social issues like growing injustice in society, persistent poverty, and the stench of corruption in Government the Synod seldom speaks.

Technologically there should be no objection to such speaking. One may be afraid to antagonize some Christian vested interests by speaking up too analytically about the structures of injustice, oppression and exploitation in society. Generally the bishops prefer to remain on a plane of general piety than to risk controversial pronouncements.

Behind such reluctance to make analytical social pronouncements there may be also some diffidence on the part of the bishops about their own competence in such matters.

The Constitution of the Church clearly says that the Episcopal synod is the final authority in interpreting all matters of "faith, order and discipline". Social questions are seldom seen as falling within these categories.

Even the issues of war and peace, arms race and arms trade, star wars and nuclear weapons seldom find themselves worthy of synodical pronouncements.

Perhaps this pattern may change soon. Perhaps the bishops will acquire sufficient self-confidence to speak on such issues. The bishops are all fairly well educated people, move at home in the modern world than most other Orthodox bishops elsewhere.

Another reason for such reticence on important human issues is the characteristically Orthodox desire for unanimity in the Holy Episcopal Synod. Some of these social issues can generate controversy and divide the bishops. Most bishops would like to avoid that.

It is also true that the Church does not have its office structure, a special person or team responsible for studying social questions and preparing possible draft statements to be approved by the bishops.

To put it very briefly, there is little perception of any need or responsibility for the Episcopal Synod to pronounce itself on social, moral or political-economic questions. The Episcopal Synod prefers to leave such matters to the wisdom and discretion of the laity and to the freedom and discernment of individual preachers or priests.

The only exception to this general rule is the Orthodox Student Christian Movement (MGOCSM) and the Orthodox Youth League. These organizations run annual general conferences and periodic regional conferences. There the more socially aware bishops give talks on science and technology, war and peace, poverty and injustice and so on. But the speeches of the bishops have no official status as far as the church structure is concerned. The conference may pass some resolutions on social questions, but these largely go unheeded.

In general, the Orthodox perception is that while it is the responsibility of the Church to preach and to teach the way of Christ to the believers, Church hierarchies have no need to make formal statements taking sides in a moral debate. The laymen and women are intelligent. They should be helped to see the moral and theological aspects of social issues. The hierarchy should not, however, pronounce any particular positions; they can make their own decisions.

Is the Present Pattern Adequate?

The present writer is fully convinced that there are three issues at least on which the Church must today speak out-so that its members as well as others may find moral guidance. These three issues are, as the World Council of Churches has shown, Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation.

On Justice the Church fathers have been quite vocal. St. John Chrysostom, for example, was prepared to confront the prodigal practices of the nobility in the 4th century and to suffer because he criticized royalty and the rich. But these were never official statements by the Church on such issues.

On questions of war, leaders of local churches have generally sought to justify the wars run by their own principalities and to condemn the enemy-even when the enemy was also Christian. Of course in the earliest period of the Churches life, Christians refused to wear arms and suffered on that account. But seldom has the Church pronounced itself officially on such matters. The only machinery available for such matters. The only machinery available for such representative declaration was the ecumenical Council. Some of these Councils have made decisions on specific moral issues but seldom on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.

One reason for such silence was the recognition that such matters were primarily the responsibility of the State. And in a monarchical state, the citizen can only petition, not decide.

We are today living in democratic societies, and we cannot dissociate ourselves from responsibility for the State and its decisions. The Church as an organised unity within a democratic structure can speak as the representative of its members.

In the West, however, when the Church speaks, it is not doing so as a Christian lobby. It has had a traditional role as the Conscience-keeper of Society. This role is no longer recognized either by the modern state or by Christians themselves in many cases. Yet many people in the West expect the Church to speak on moral issues, though they may not commit themselves in advance to follow the lines laid down by the Church. European, American and Australasian societies have

possibilities here which do not apply to other societies where Churches have not traditionally played the role of Conscience-keeper.

This issue has to be seen also from the perspective of societies like, India, where within the nation as a whole, the Christians constitute only a small minority - 2.6% of the population. This minority is recognized by the State as such, and are given certain privileges, like that of running its own institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.) and so on.

But the national state in India does not expect the Church to give it any moral guidance. In fact the secular state in India will not accept such guidance even from the leaders of India's majority religion, Hinduism. One reason may be that Hinduism is a collection of various religious schools and has never had a comprehensive organization or structure which could act or speak on behalf of all the schools in Hinduism.

There is also the fact that the Christian Church in India is also badly divided and cannot speak with one voice. If it could manage to come together in some ecumenical conference and speak on social-moral issues like war and peace, its voice would still not be regarded as the voice of India's conscience-keeper. That role would not be conceded even to a united Hindu or inter-religious pronouncement.

In these circumstances the possible purpose of an ecumenical Christian pronouncement, or even the pronouncement by a single church can only be to help in the shaping of public opinion.

The Indian Orthodox Church privileged in one sense. It has been part of the Indian scene, though a very small part of it, for almost two millennia. It could speak as a national church. However, for the majority of India's people, any Church would be only the representative of a 'foreign' religion and would have thus only a limited influence on the minds of all but its own members.

Despite all these limitations, a clear and well-argued presentation on the dangers of nuclear war, on the persistence of poverty and injustice, and on our responsibility to maintain the delicate eco-balance that sustains life could have an impact on public opinion. If others can perceive that the Church is speaking not to conserve the interests of the Christian minority but rather for the good of all people everywhere, a Church proclamation, can get a limited hearing even among non-Christians.

A case can thus be made out for the Indian Orthodox Church Beginning a process of study on these three mutually related issues of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation as preparatory to an official statement by the Episcopal Synod on these matters. Even if the declaration may not be accepted as binding even on its own members, a dent can be made on the public conscience such a statement will stand or fall on the virtue of its own clarity and coherence, its wisdom and perspicacity, its power to persuade rather than the impose.

Humanity is in grave peril. The dimension of the peril is with-out precedent. It is only in our time that humanity has developed the technological power to destroy itself and all life on this planet. It is only in our time that the system of exploitation has become global in scope and integrally

related to the arms race and arms trade. It is only in our time that our industrial system can threaten to upset the ecological balance so substantially.

It should therefore be possible for the Orthodox Church in India to take this up as a high priority and initiate a study process which will lead to a well-argued case for peace and disarmament, for justice in society and for caring for the biosphere.

The Orthodox Church is not a confessional church and has no such tradition as declaring a moral option as a matter of status confessions. It has, however, always stood for love and compassion for the whole of humanity.

It is in the context of that compassion and love that the Church has to take note of the catastrophic nature of the peril that faces humanity. In that spirit, it can exhort Christians and others to repentance, that is turning away from folly and evil, to prayer, and to compassionate but specific action to change the course of the world.

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