

ON WHOSE AUTHORITY?  
By Michael A. Schuler  
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SEARCHING FOR SOLID GROUND - TWO PERSPECTIVES

From Mariana Caplan (Caplan is a counselor and author of several works on psychotherapy and spirituality)

Few areas in the field of contemporary spirituality create as much challenge, confusion and provocation as the role of the spiritual teacher. As a result of charismatic charlatans roaming the spiritual circuit, making their way into conventional households through the nation's most popular magazines and television shows, terms such as "guru" and "spiritual teacher" have become part of our colloquial English vocabulary...

The field of so-called spiritual mastery is vast. At one extreme are individuals who can earn \$50,000 in a weekend for teaching four-thousand year-old *tantric* sexual practices to couples, and on the other end are great masters and spiritual leaders of unquestionable integrity like the Dalai Lama. Yet neophyte spiritual seekers label them all "gurus" and regard them either with naïve adulation or grave suspicion...

One of our primary jobs as spiritual aspirants is to learn the task of discrimination... If what we really want is to fulfill our highest possibility as human beings, then it is not only necessary to find a teacher, but to find someone who we know will be able and willing to help us realize our greatest potential...

When approaching the spiritual marketplace, it is essential to be aware of vast qualitative differences between the masses of teachers available. The field of spiritual mastery is not as it appears at first glance, and a preliminary and thorough study of the merchandise is a must before making any impulsive purchases...

The late Swami Muktananda said that the market for false teachers is growing because the market for false and ignorant disciples is growing. When we begin to consider false teachers from the perspective of our own weak discipleship, we challenge ourselves to embrace a perspective far wider than that of the common spiritual critic...

"You get what you deserve," comments the psychologist Charles Tart. This is an unpopular perspective, but the fact remains that if we find ourselves with a teacher who

is abusive or a charlatan, or who "brainwashes" us, it is we who put ourselves there.

From Richard Holloway (Holloway is the former Bishop of Edinburgh and professor of divinity at Edinburgh University)

There are a number of ways of describing the atmosphere of Western Society at the beginning of the Third Millennium, but the one that is easiest to understand is to think of our society as...a post-traditional community, in the sense that no single tradition is in dominant control of human culture any longer. It is true, of course, that there are still many strong religious traditions available, and they attract considerable loyalty from their adherents... (but) these religious systems have lost their automatic authority over the lives of most people in our culture. That being the case, Western society now lacks a strong sense of agreement on how to understand and order the life of human communities...

One of the inescapable aspects of our post-traditional society is that it generates an awareness that there are many cultures and value systems among human beings. Many people find that living in this kind of plural society induces confusion and anxiety in them...

One response to this development is what we might describe as "defiant immobilism." For religious immobilists, clinging to the past is an obvious refuge; it is a desperate holding on for fear of finding something worse. When we try to engage in conversation with persons of this persuasion (so-called Fundamentalists) we soon find that no real converse is possible. They defiantly hold on to the tradition that is being threatened by new developments because they refuse to acknowledge the validity of any point of view other than the one into which they have been initiated...

The polar opposite of this position is a kind of absolute moral relativism, which holds that once you abandon the directive power of religion there is no longer any basis on which you can promote authoritative moral and spiritual choices... Many of us simply get caught in the crossfire between competing extremes: between those who say that the law has already been laid down on everything and we have only to apply it, and those who say that there is no basis on which we can make general moral judgments, so that in a post-traditional world it is every man for himself.

\*\* REFLECTIONS \*\*

Several weeks ago *The Wall Street Journal* reported on an emerging trend in certain conservative Christian congregations. As an example, the story pointed to the experience of a seventy-one year old woman, **Karolyn Caskey**, who had been expelled from the Allen Baptist Church in southwest Michigan.

**Mrs. Caskey** had been for many years a pillar of that small congregation. A member for half a century, she tithed 10% of her pension and had been a dedicated Sunday School teacher. "She's one of the nicest, kindest people I know," one of her neighbors observed. Nevertheless, one Sunday morning last June Mrs. **Caskey** was handcuffed and escorted from the small whitewashed Baptist church by a Michigan state trooper and a sheriff's deputy. The charge was trespassing.

**Mrs. Caskey** was taken in a squad car to the county jail and incarcerated. Surprised to see an old lady in her church clothes, one of the inmates asked, "What happened? Did you rob a church?" "No," she replied, "I just attended one." Ultimately, a judge dismissed the case and told county law enforcement not to arrest **Mrs. Caskey** again, unless she was creating a disturbance.

What had this faithful Christian woman done to provoke such measures? According to the minister of Allen Baptist, **Jason Burrick**, she was "spreading a spirit of cancer and discord" and deserved to be shunned. Apparently, not long after **Rev. Burrick** had been called to serve the small church, he and **Mrs. Caskey** found themselves on opposite sides of an argument over the church's by-laws. She pointed out that deacons were supposed to be appointed as lay leaders, but her pastor said that, given the small size of the congregation, they weren't needed.

She insisted, and he resisted, and before long he informed her that her membership had been terminated. This was followed by an open letter to the congregation stating that **Mrs. Caskey** had been removed for "taking action against the church and your preacher." According to the letter, **Caskey** was guilty of "gossip, slander and idolatry."

According to the *Journal* report, such measures are becoming more common in conservative Christian circles, where members are given the heave-ho simply for skipping church or opposing congregational leadership. Such extreme measures are justified, as one man put it, because "the

Bible says that causing discord in the church is an abomination."

The foregoing would appear to indicate that at the conservative end of the spectrum a concerted effort is being made to shore up the church's waning authority. As the late Episcopal bishop **James Pike** observed more than thirty years ago,

The ideas...of a clergyman, whether parson or primate, were once widely regarded as automatically true. But these days having anything from "Rev." to "Most Rev." in front of his name does not produce the former almost Pavlovian response.

This shift in people's attitudes has caused considerable consternation among conservative religious leaders, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or Muslim. The desire of many contemporary worshipers to enjoy greater spiritual autonomy is seen as both inappropriate and dangerous. The divinely-sanctioned authority of Scripture and clergy must be maintained, **George Barna** warns, otherwise "the Church has nothing to offer our dying culture beyond some nice buildings and programs."

That is one way to look at it, I suppose, but it clearly is not the only way to settle the issue of proper authority in either a sacred or a secular context. Granted that the exercise of authority is vital to the effective operation of human institutions, and that the application of some sort of authority is inevitable, still, we do have various options at our disposal.

Authority presents itself in many guises, but three in particular are worth considering. The first we might describe as the authority that is vested in a person's station, their position in the organizational pecking order. Thus, when George W. Bush declares that he is "the decider" he is simply invoking the authority inherent in the Presidential office. Similarly, when the Roman Catholic Pontiff delivers an official pronouncement on abortion, birth control, clergy celibacy or woman priests he is said to be speaking "ex cathedra" - as a duly elected church official rather than from private conviction.

Significant authority has traditionally been conferred on people purely by virtue of their rank, regardless of any personal qualities or qualifications. The very labels "doctor," "professor," "general," "chief" or "guru" imply that the holders of such titles are entitled to respect and compliance. Positional authority is a fixture even of a

social structure as small as the family. "Why do I need to go to bed now?" the child asks. "Because I am the parent and I said so," Mom or Dad replies. That's positional authority.

But less deference is paid to this sort of authority now than in previous times, and the average person is generally less awed by titles and the accouterments of office than earlier generations. The spread of democracy has altered people's perceptions and generally made them less receptive to top-down hierarchical models of leadership. Popes and Presidents who are too imperious can expect significant resistance.

Furthermore, as the media have become more powerful and intrusive, the faults and foibles of various officials have been exposed and this has diminished the stature of the office itself. **Bill Clinton's** dalliances and **George W. Bush's** habits of deceit have inflicted enormous damage to the institution of the Presidency, just as the exposure of dozens of pedophiles has undermined the Roman Catholic priesthood.

It is in some ways unfortunate that positional authority has lost so much of its aura, because a stable society needs officials who can be trusted to provide effective leadership and to make difficult decisions. The Chinese philosopher Confucius knew this very well, and the Chinese civilization that adopted his ideas featured an elaborate system of relationships based on different grades of positional authority. Everyone occupied an appropriate niche and was accorded the rights and responsibilities suitable to their position. However, no one, even the Emperor, was granted a blank check and all relationships were governed by the overarching principle of reciprocity.

A second kind of authority reflects not so much position as convention. One thinks of the authority wielded by sacred scripture, the U.S. Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ours is said to be a "government of laws, not of men," which would suggest that in the United States, positional authority (the President, the Supreme Court) is held in check by certain political conventions.

Likewise, Roman Catholics generally agree that the sacraments possess a redemptive authority in and of themselves. In other words, the character of the priest who administers the sacraments can neither enhance or diminish their efficacy. In our own Unitarian Universalist Society, the Bond of Union exists as an "authoritative" statement of our mission and purpose as a congregation.

Ministers and lay leaders agree to serve in compliance with it.

Societies today feature competing sources of conventional or cultural authority, which sometimes makes it difficult for citizens to know which has the superior claim to their allegiance. If I am both a pious Christian and a patriotic American, I may find myself torn between a secular Constitution and sacred scripture.

Tensions also arise when the authority of the free market bumps up against that of the regulatory state. Can the market be trusted to exercise proper authority and "do the right thing" by the planet and its people? Or, on the other hand, should the state's authority be ratcheted up to curb the excesses of the market?

Revealed religion and investigative science afford a third example of this clash between two authorities. Whereas the latter insists that there is no such thing as a fixed and final truth, revealed religion maintains that God's word can neither be challenged or changed. Religion seeks to protect an old and venerable way of looking at the world whereas science, as **T.H. Huxley** put it, requires the absolute rejection of (old forms) of authority."

Or, in the words of **Albert Einstein**, "The most important tool of the scientist is the wastebasket."

There is yet another locus of authority that exists independently of office or convention and can only be described as personal. **Pope John the Twenty-Third**, who called the Second Vatican Council into session, enjoyed immense authority over believing Catholics by virtue of his office. But he became a revered figure among Catholics and non-Catholics alike because of the beauty of his personality.

One gets the impression that **John the 23<sup>rd</sup>** didn't want people to think that his office automatically made him a font of infallible wisdom. If people looked to him for guidance and inspiration, he hoped it would be because they recognized his personal qualities as well as his position at the apex of the Catholic hierarchy. Indeed, **John 23<sup>rd</sup>** was the first pope in history to answer a question with, "How would I know? I am only a pope!"

A similar observation can be made about **The Dalai Lama**, whose office grants him significant spiritual authority over those who belong to the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. But it is his personal authority that has made the **Dalai Lama** such a consequential spiritual and political figure. Like **John the 23<sup>rd</sup>**, the **Dalai Lama** exhibits a

gentle, self-effacing charisma that draws people to him and enhances his stature.

The ability to command respect by virtue of personal authority enables teachers, preachers, politicians, physicians to make the most of the positions they occupy. When an office-holder exhibits depth of knowledge, breadth of experience, self-control, integrity, enthusiasm they can become a powerful, positive presence in other people's lives.

Unfortunately, personal authority appears under many guises, some of which are far from beneficial. One thinks of the way certain demagogues have been able to sway an audience or seduce a congregation. People who project strength, self-confidence, certainty, determination are often able to play on people's hopes and fears and thereby gain tremendous influence. **Adolph Hitler** rose to power by virtue of his uncanny ability to tap into the resentments, fire the imaginations and incite the emotions of millions of Germans. **Janwillem van de Wetering** warns that "when the disciple is ready to fall into a trap, the bogus master arrives."

Who is this man with the charismatic eyes and the hypnotic touch? Is he perhaps the projection of all we want him to be...? We must always take care not to throw reason overboard when we select the guide who promises to lead us out of error.

Personal authority can be powerfully seductive, and demands a degree of dispassion and discernment that those who are exposed to it don't always possess.

So where does authority reside in our own liberal religious tradition and which form of authority - positional, conventional or personal - carries the most weight?

Clearly, the position of UU "minister" is accorded far less authority than in most other traditions. Freedom of the pulpit grants me the right to express ideas and opinions without risking censure or termination. My position also carries with it a certain amount of administrative authority, but the banning, shunning, excommunicating of church members lies well beyond my prerogatives.

In a Unitarian Universalist community, a minister's authority is largely personal and is a function of knowledge, commitment, spiritual depth and compassion. **Gary Zukav** defines "authentic power" as:

the alignment of our thoughts, emotions and actions with the highest part of ourselves, such that we are filled with enthusiasm, purpose and meaning.

I think that's a pretty good description of what a UU minister ought to aspire to in terms of personal authority. It is, at any rate, what I strive for.

In our tradition and in our faith communities covenants such as the Bond of Union and documents like the church By-Laws and its Mission Statement are trustworthy sources of conventional authority. Policy making is the prerogative of our elected lay leaders, exercising legitimate positional authority. Lay leaders also bear primary responsibility for insuring that First Unitarian Society remains a safe, accepting and nurturing place for all its members.

But what sets a Unitarian Universalist community apart with respect to this issue is the granting of final authority to the individual seeker. I share **Krishnamurti's** perspective on spiritual authority - that the teacher's true function is not to define the path, only to point in a promising direction. The listener or observer never forfeits the right to reject or accept what is being offered. We expect our members to honor their conscience, exercise their own judgment while recognizing the right of others to do likewise.

Ultimately, a UU community exists as an open laboratory for spiritual exploration. We covenant to support each other with loving feedback and cheerful encouragement in the ongoing search for depth of understanding and happiness.

Over a century ago, the philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** predicted that advances in science, psychology and anthropology would soon cause millions of people to lose confidence in traditional sources of authority and with it their sense of spiritual security. These losses would, in turn, lead to a widespread depression, substance abuse and self-centeredness. In this **Nietzsche** proved prophetic. What he didn't foresee was that these developments would also be accompanied by a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, as people sought guidance from some source of absolute authority.

I believe that liberal religion offers a viable alternative to both **Nietzsche's** anarchic vision and the domineering approach preferred by the religious right. What the world needs is a truly balanced perspective on authority and an effective means for it to be fairly

distributed and effectively shared. That's what this congregation stands for, and that's what the world badly needs right now.