

Incarnating Authority:  
A Critical Account of Authority in  
the Church

*Paul Avis*  
*Angela Berlis*  
*Nikolaus Knoepffler*  
*Martin O'Malley (eds.)*



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Prof. Dr. mult. Nikolaus Knoepffler, Universität Jena  
und  
Prof. Dr. Elke Mack, Universität Erfurt

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# Preface – Incarnating Authority in the Christian Church

Martin O'Malley

This volume presents the scholarship of authors who met in September 2017 at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany for a conference 'Incarnating Authority – Autorität Gestalten.' The event marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's reputed posting of 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. The articles of this ensuing collection examine the unique significance of authority for the church in our present time.

Authority is a concept relevant to both theological and political practice, and its study reveals the deep interdependence of religious, social, and political spheres. The impact of Martin Luther's theologically-based actions upon political realities is well-trodden ground, but not the focus here. Rather, Luther's actions as authority-structuring performance is the archetype and example forming the background for critically exploring the authority concept. Uniting this volume's contributions is a focus upon authority in the church with a view to potential paths for ecumenical action.

In times of relative stability, authoritative structures (political, social, and religious) accrue ontological-like properties in the form of habituated and institutionalized social practice. This process has been described classically for religious institutions by Weber, and in legal institutions by Luhmann and others. The legal principle *stare decisis* exemplifies this semi-formal substantiating process of institutionalizing authoritative practice in common law legal systems. Along similar lines, Charles Taylor's major works have explored the constituting dynamics of narrative-in-action. Taylor uses the term 'social imaginary' rather than ideology or worldview because of the great breadth of elements that make up all we include in our complexly-identified social existences.

Once our institutional existences have achieved ontological-like solidity, authorities function according to patterns and rationalities

that can mask the underlying social nature of such artefacts. But our institutions do indeed change and theorists from philosophical, sociological, economic, and psychological fields continue to explore and expand our understanding of socially-constitutive structures and consequent authority roles based upon shared social meaning. Social change can be understood according to progressing or degenerating narratives. Axel Honneth (2014), on the one hand, uses Hegelian analysis and its recognition dynamics to characterize emancipatory movements such as campaigns for civil rights, the rights of women, and more. On the other hand, structural changes in society and church that disrupt traditional practice and understandings can be experienced as threatening, spawning slippery-slope arguments engendering resistance, reaction, or most regrettably for churches, dissociation. Though Martin Luther King Jr prophetically preached of history's arc bending towards justice, there are plenty of examples of history's arc missing a righteous mark.

This volume's contributions consider social and ecclesial structures and movements with a view to encouraging momentum towards Christian reconciliation and unity while preserving our local communities' cherished traditions. The courageous performance in 1517 Wittenberg is a lens that deserves continued attention because Luther's decidedly theologically-motivated action reveals how, in disruptive times, prophetic action can be both authority-destructive and authority-constructive.

The conference benefited from interdisciplinary scholarship while focusing on religious and theological reflection from specific religious traditions: Anglican, Old Catholic, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed. In their present contributions, scholars address similarities and differences in understanding authority within their own ecclesial communities' respective theological understandings and authority performances. The scholars were asked to focus on common ecumenical ideas, principles, strategies, and figures relevant to church and authority. For example, how might a church incorporate or actualize forms of authority in a united communion? How might this be feasible and theologically justifiable? The objective was not only to theorize about authority abstractly, but to also explore how under-

standing is achieved performatively. Thus, scholars were asked to propose action-scenarios for ecumenical advances.

The historical lens of Luther, together with comparative modern-period ecclesial/political structuring models provide insight into the interdependence of religious and secular spheres. For example, Roman Catholic papal and curial practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century paralleled the rise of late-modern bureaucratic state practices. Centralizing authority assumed during this time was perhaps considered natural and indispensable. And centralizing ecclesial offices were institutionalized with theologically-grounded frameworks, practices, and symbols that held sway until the Second Vatican Council. Consistent with that council, the present papacy of Francis is disrupting many authority artefacts with both administrative and public actions (prophetic performance) that undermine stabilized expectations, perhaps opening opportunities for new authoritative practices. Thus, prophetic action, whether historical or contemporary, is an important element of authority disruption and creation worthy of scholarly attention. As Francis recommended during his address to the World Council of Churches in June 2018, 'Let us ask ourselves: What can we do *together*? If a particular form of service is possible, why not plan and carry it out together, and thus start to experience a more intense fraternity in the exercise of concrete charity?' Unified action can precede institutional ecclesial union.

Subsidiarity is a concept that, among others like conciliarity, stands out as especially relevant to religious and secular authority conceptions. Rooted in Christian and European traditions of exercising political, legal, and ecclesial authority, subsidiarity can be understood as a conceptual instrument containing long-tested 'localist' wisdom. While remaining subject to critical scrutiny, subsidiarity as a conceptual instrument can help form discussion and practice of exercising authority. It is generally understood in three often overlapping ways:

- a) a juridical adjudicating principle of local-law priority;
- b) a moral/aesthetic aspiration to keep things local;
- c) a principle of management to achieve a practical goal of efficiency, attractiveness, participation, or some other benefit.

Like other authority concepts, subsidiarity retains the meaning that we consciously or even unconsciously ascribe to it, but it seems a uniquely fitting concept for Christian communities to respect the uniqueness and dignity of their local communities while simultaneously understanding themselves to be united in an undivided Christian body. Christian faith is, after all, both local and universal. Faith is deeply personal and is contextualized in local church liturgical and administrative practice, even as that faith is committed to the universal truth that God created, sanctified, and unites the whole world with himself through Jesus Christ's loving life, death, and resurrection. Understanding itself to be Christ's incarnate body, ecclesial practice must be true to Christianity's personal, communal, and universal aspects.

The word subsidiarity itself is relatively recent, attaining recognition in 20<sup>th</sup>-century papal encyclicals. Nevertheless, the authority-logic it represents is far older and is found in the Roman law traditions of European common law. Though not based in specifically theological principles, Roman law and its common-law traditions were thoroughly integrated in Christian Europe for many centuries. Even the Reformers, who looked suspiciously on all thing Roman, were quick to recognize the advantages of common-law jurisprudence's local-law priority; this priority could protect church practice from secular overreach. Melancthon saw the value of such protections after 1550 when reformed traditions had taken root but were threatened by political instabilities. He even compared the protective legal codes as analogous to written religious scripture.

The basic argument is that subsidiarity's juridical meaning (a) should be recognised more vigorously because it reflects a fundamental Christian insight. Moralistic/aesthetic (b) and practical (c) considerations are fine, but the juridical meaning emphasizes that local communities have a specific dignity with legitimate claims to protect long-practised ecclesial traditions. This is much more than a rule-of-thumb 'keep it local' suggestion. The wariness of authority is built into the Protestant perspective. And Roman Catholic theologians like Rahner also specifically argue for juridical limitations of potentially colonizing ecclesial author-

ity, even for such roles as the papal office. Rahner used a subsidiarity-authority logic to limit papal authority and check paternalistic potential.

Common contemporary subsidiarity understanding may lack this juridical dimension (a), claiming only that the most local competent governing agency should have the freedom to exercise their authority. This moralistic notion (b) lacks the righteous vigour of Roman law jurisprudence, which is providentially well-established in Roman Catholic canon law. Thus there are resources in the tradition supporting the view that keeping things local is a justice requirement that prohibits external authority from intruding upon local matters, unless the common good demands such intervention. Recognizing historical remnants in the tradition is important, but so too are the actions which embody (incarnate!) that wisdom, such as Pope Francis' willingness to recognise significant responsibilities and freedoms of local dioceses and regional bishops' conferences.

A key question is whether hierarchical structures of authority are permeable to the local responsibilities and freedoms premised by Christian faith, so that individual believers as well as the community of the faithful connected by their received faith can be more than merely deferential sons and daughters to the elders of specific churches. Subsidiarity provides a framework whereby local churches rightfully maintain their local identities and dearly-loved practices, while being unified more universally in matters of common faith. That common faith makes our church divisions a kind of heresy – a denial of our union in the Incarnate Body of Christ. Yet differences on specific questions pose significant obstacles only if the ecumenical goal is perfect agreement on all matters of faith, liturgy, and morals. Diversity can be approached in a way that does not necessarily endanger broader faith-based unities and commitments. Within a subsidiarity framework marked by toleration, humility, and mutual respect, discourse about differences can be opportunities of both challenge and growth to hear and respond to the life-giving Spirit in the Gospel Word.

Perhaps even academic conferences can be prophetic actions, insofar as such actions of common discourse, reflection, and friendship embody the goal of ecumenical union.

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