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Religious Authority In An Ecumenical Age And A Pluralistic World

BY WALTER H. CAPPS

(The Paul Wattson Lecture established in 1974 at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, expanded to the University of San Francisco in 1980 and in 1995 to Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax. The following lecture was presented this year at the University of San Francisco.)

I am very honored to be here to deliver this Paul Wattson Lecture at the University of San Francisco. It is a tremendous privilege to be asked to help perpetuate the spirit of a man who meant so much to so many people, and who left such a strong legacy. I've had opportunity over the years to be involved in various kinds of professional activities, from teaching and doing research within the University of California, to participating in and giving guidance to the California Council for the Humanities, to participating and giving guidance to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, to participating in various campaigns for public office (including my own), and I've come to a conclusion that I know will hold forever: those teachers and guides who are dedicated to the oneness of humanity, and who therefore work to enunciate what we have in common over against what divides us, are trustworthy teachers and guides. I know Paul Wattson was such a man, and it is in this spirit that I am proud to offer these reflections on the subject of religious authority at the present time.

You will note that I have changed the subject slightly, from Church Leadership to Religious Authority in an Ecumenical and Pluralistic Age. The idea is to expand the subject of religious authority beyond the range of that over which the church has either

direct or presumed jurisdiction. For, given the unprecedented ferment in religious belief and thought that is occurring at the present time, ferment unprecedented, I suggest, since perhaps the beginning of the founding of Christianity, questions of authority of all kinds are left open and unresolved. To put this item in perspective, let me simply recall one of the slogans of the 1960s, 1970s, and even into the 1980s. Remember it? QUESTION AUTHORITY the bumper stickers read. And everyone was counseled to question authority. Or, as we used to say in the classroom, "We're not telling you what position to take, or what opinion to have, how you should believe, or what you should believe. We're not telling you any of this. Rather, we want you to make up your own minds. Think it through for yourselves. Come to your own conclusions." Well, this is the kind of disposition that is most appropriate in response to an age of heavy dogma, when beliefs are too tight, or too specifically circumscribed. But in 1996, though there is no doubt that we do indeed encounter political and religious correctness, the deeper problem is that there is no authority left to question. There is hardly anything that is authoritative any more. In fact, I've sometimes thought that the mood, or mode, or collective temperament that describes our time is that of atomism.

Why atomism? Because our world is divided into bit parts, isolated bit parts, competing with each other, competing against each other. We have come to the point at which individualized authority is normative authority, which position stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from common good, public trust, bonds of collectivity, communion of saints, and other manifestations of the kind of qualitative unity and togetherness which Paul Wattson's life exemplified.

A pastor friend of mine in New York City told me of standing in the pulpit of his church one Sunday morning, delivering what he thought was a pretty good homily. And out in front of him was a young

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woman — he described her as a disheveled young woman — who sat restless in the church pew, finally leaving the liturgy early. But she left a note with the usher on which these words were written: "I'm searching for a mystery I can trust," she wrote: a mystery she could trust.

But it is not surprising that she was confused, for to what does one turn in a world like this? How does either religious or spiritual authority display or dispose itself in a world like ours? How are the problems and challenges of religious authority addressed in a world like this one?

What kind of world? Well, do you recall how remarkably simple the world was just a few years ago. When I was in college, I worked in the admissions office of a large hospital. And when the patients would come in, we would ask them a series of questions: Name, ad-

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dress, next of kin, insurance coverage, and so forth. Then, for the sake of the chaplaincy office, we would ask the question about religious preference. And, for this, we'd hold our heads down, indicating that we were sort of slipping the question in, trying to avoid being controversial, or raising any sort of ire (most of the people were apprehensive enough anyway when entering the hospital). But then we would encourage the answer: "Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Other?" These were the four possibilities. And some people would say "I'm not sure I believe anything — mark me down Protestant." Or, if one were atheistic or agnostic, this stance was designated as "Other."

What would the profile look like today? I haven't seen the hospital form, but I have seen it on admissions papers for college students. And here the range goes from Christian to Jewish to Buddhist to Muslim to what? New Age? to statements like "I'm not very religious but I know I am spiritual."

Recall too how simple it used to be to peruse books about religion in bookstores. There would simply be a section on RELIGION. But today that section is divided into the various religions of the world. In addition, some of the so-called "spiritual" books are in the "Self-Help" section, or in "Psychology," and some bookstores even carry a special section on "Spirituality." So it is not as easy as it used to be to find one's way.

I think it has been a couple of decades now since I first heard the question in class: "Dr. Capps, can one be a Christian and a Buddhist at the same time?" And I had the sense even then that this wasn't a question, but a statement. Of course, since that time there have been books, good ones too, on "Christian Zen." And the book that so many people are reading today, Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* makes overtures in this direction, which overtures are extended and made more explicit in Thich Nhat Hanh's masterful, poetic study, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. But these books are just the beginning. Note too Diana Eck's (in my judgment) wonderful autobiographical account, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, or the brilliant studies by my former colleague, Raimundo Panikkar, or the work of Ewert Cousins, not to mention the series of important statements that come from the mind and hand of Huston Smith, one of the true intellectual and spiritual treasures of our time. When we look at this amazing outpouring of statements on this subject, we are made acutely aware that the old trichotomy, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, supplemented by "other," or the other taxonomical trichotomy, "believer, atheist, agnostic," fall far short of being reflective of the real range of religious belief and behavior that is characteristic of our time.

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Look too to what is happening within Christian self-understanding today. A century and more ago, there were numerous books on the subject made prominent by Adolf von Harnack and other (mostly German scholars) on *The Essence of Christianity*. Using an Enlightenment, specifically Kantian form of argumentation, Harnack asked: "what is that without which Christianity would not be what it is?" The assumption was that careful textual criticism, historical analysis, and creedal inquiry would disclose the essence of the faith. And if one is tempted to believe that this *isolative* interest of reason is characteristic of lines of inquiry and argumentation of now a century ago, one should note that even the writings of most contemporary theologians including my good friend, Jurgen Moltmann tend to approach Christianity as a monolith — that is, a monolith whose essence can be discerned and reproduced. But how can one think this way after it has become so obvious that there are varieties of Christianity, indeed, that there are Christianities? And I do not simply mean that Christianity in Russia say, is different from Christianity in Italy, or that traditional European Christianity is different in significant respects from the Christianity that is mushrooming in Africa. The truth here is even more radical, and thus much more compelling. The truth is that Christianity was never a monolith. Even in the beginning, there was not one Christianity, but there were several, and they weren't all called Christianity either. In this regard, I have been instructed by Vincent Martin's new book, *A House Divided: The Parting of the Ways Between Synagogue and Church*, which is a very compelling appeal toward cross-cultural and cross-traditional religious understanding. Along the way, Father Martin presents a very arresting thesis, namely, that the common source of both Jewish religion and early Christianity is Temple Juda-

ism. But after Temple Judaism is challenged, the lines of division move into three dominant strands: Rabbinic Judaism, Apostolic Christianity, and that wide range of belief and behavior that belong to the desert communities, the Essenes, the Nag Hammadi community, and those generally referred as "Gnostic Christians." Father Martin believes there can be some new rapprochement between all of these groups. But the plot becomes even more intriguing when it includes the fact that significant portions of New Age religion identify with this third strand of development, that is, with Gnostic Christianity. In this regard, I will simply reference the writing of Marianne Williamson, author of the best-selling book, *Illuminata*, whose work exemplifies this orientation. And we can add that in 1995 more people brought Marianne Williamson's books than those by any other single religion or spirituality author.

But let's go even further and deeper with this line of exploration. It is one thing to say that Christianity is no monolith. This fact, I think, can be firmly established. It is even more to suggest that no religion, even in trans-monolithic form, can be identified and defined in isola-

tion from other religions. Put in positive form, religions are always defined in contact with other religions. Thus, even in more traditional or classical form, a definition of Christianity entails an understanding of Judaism, and, increasingly, of Islam. But to these religions we would have to add philosophies. A definition of Christianity entails an understanding of Platonic philosophy, Aristotelian philosophy, hellenistic philosophy, neo-Platonic philosophy, and so forth. These other religions and philosophies are not simply contextual to Christianity, but are also contentual and substantive. And this principle is applicable not only to the time of formation. It is also applicable to the entire history and development of the tradition, or shall we say *traditions*, in the plural rather than the singular? We are now in a situation in which Christianity cannot be defined except in relationship to Buddhism and Hinduism, and the other faiths and world-views. Perhaps one of the most striking exemplifications of how shifting historical events affect religious understanding came in a statement by Yassar Arafat at Christmas time, who, after taking jurisdiction of the city of Bethle-

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hem, referred to Jesus as "the first Palestinian revolutionary."

So we come back to the question: how is religious authority established in a world like this? Or, the same question in another form: in an atomistic age, are anyone's views as authoritative as anyone else's? Or, to proceed directly to the question that is implicit in the title of this lecture: how is the authority of the Church exercised in an ecumenical age in a pluralistic world?

Permit me to hearken back to the famous statement by St. Vincent of Lerins, defining "the orthodox faith" as "that which has been believed by all people, everywhere, at all times." How do we make sense of a descriptive statement like this in times like these? Or, to bring the matter closer to our situation, what about Paul Wattson's concern for unity in an ecumenical age and in a pluralistic world?

I must confess that I have been struggling with these questions, not simply because I took on this lecture assignment, but also because I am a candidate for the United States Congress, in the 22nd District of California. What I have discovered, not surprisingly, that the inchoateness of the world of attitude and belief is matched by the inchoateness of the world of politics. If we find the religious world to be a world of competing voices, competing interest, and atomistic authority, it should not surprise us

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to find the functional equivalent in the world of politics. And, this, of course, is the way it is. Public trust in representative government has been broken. Faith in the ability of the prevailing political parties to represent the political sensibilities of the people is at an all-time low. Confidence in our elected leaders is waning too, as well as confidence among those leaders that election to high office can really produce any tangible good. Witness the recent defection of previously stalwart office holders like Sam Nunn, Bill Bradley, William Cohen, and numerous others. Notice the way that most official political talk is more about process than about substance. There are sustained quarrels about when the budget will be balanced, and campaign finance reform, term limits, federal jurisdiction vs. returning more power to state governments, and the like. And, into the vacuum we exercise a kind of national intrigue over whether Hillary Rodham Clinton knew about the Whitewater

papers that were suddenly discovered in the White House, or whether she had the White House travel staff fired or simply expressed frustration over their job performances. None of this, given the real challenges to democracy today, or given the range of issues that Alexis de Tocqueville addressed in his still worthy book, Democracy in America, will be judged to be of enduring philosophical consequence, no matter to what degree it will be of political or historical significance.

The point I wish to make in this regard is that a sense of the common good is a difficult sense to acquire within the context of contemporary American politics. Or, to expand on that thought, it is not altogether certain what the international political plot is right now. We knew what it was before: it was an all-enveloping contest between the two superpowers and their allies, in relation to which we identified all other players as third or fourth world countries. But it is neither so clear nor so simple today. In the former — or should we say, in the recent — drama, the chief choice was narrowed to two possibilities: either allegiance to democracy (under the auspices of nations loyal to the United States) or allegiance to communism and its assorted socialisms. And many presumed that the transcending of this impasse would lead to a unified family of nations. Or, as Mikhail Gorbachev greeted a

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number of us, Vietnam Veterans primarily, who went to the Soviet Union in 1988 to meet with veterans of the War in Afghanistan: "the cosmonauts have demonstrated that this is really one world; therefore, we are all brothers and sisters of one another." But recent political events have not turned out this way. The human community is not on the way toward effective unification, at least not entirely. For since the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the initial demise of communist governments, and the like, much of the world has turned to resuscitated nationalisms in response to failed worldviews. Even here the conviction that what united us is greater and more compelling than what divides us is not apparent in the world's current behavior. So what about St. Vincent's dictum, "that which has been believed everywhere, in all times, by all people?"

But the fact that the world's current behavior doesn't provide manifestation to Paul Wattson's vision is no indictment of the vision. On the contrary, the vision still holds, and yet as vision, and not as performance or as accomplishment. The fact that we don't have it is no sign that we don't need it. In truth, the fact that we don't have it is compelling evidence that we are yearning for it, and the yearning for the realization of this vision, at the present time, is manifestly eloquent. The writings of Ernst Block

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on Daz Prinzip Hoffnung, particularly as elucidated by the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, taught me long ago that what one possesses in promise, or in expectation, is a true possession, in spite of the fact additional time is required to bring such promises and expectations to fulfillment.

In this respect, the guiding principles are these: (1) that that which unites us is still stronger than that which divides us, and the instruments of division are neither as compelling nor inspiring as the instruments of unification; (2) the leaders worthy of our trust are those who bring us together, not the ones who sow seeds of division and magnify discord; (3) that in the absence of a clear discernment of a common good we can nevertheless celebrate our common humanity; and (4) that amidst the cacophony of voices, noises, and sounds that

fill the space of this world, it is essential that someone remind us that life is sacred. The testimony of trustworthy guides, both from the past and in the present, is supportive of these principles. The nineteenth century Danish hymn writer, N.F.S. Grundtvig affirmed that "we are human first," that is, we are members, one another, of the human community before we are anything more discrete than this, and as members of that community we are protected by the blessings bestowed upon the order of creation, the requisite petition about which is expressed as "give us this our daily bread." And such assurances are thoroughly compatible with the affirmation and assertion of the reality of "theos" in our lives. There is nothing to prevent us, even in times like these, from talking with one another about God. There is no reason at all why we cannot talk about the teachings of Jesus. There is really nothing to prevent us from aspiring to live the way we were asked to, and inspired to. Indeed, the ideals for which Paul Wattson lived and worked are very much alive today, but in yearning, in desire, in hope, and in promise. I trust that you understand how deeply privileged I am to be able to offer these remarks and observations under his distinguished sponsorship. ☐

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