

Authority and Power

Authority and power are connected, contested, controversial concepts. “Power” denotes the energy and effective force residing in a person, role, or institution, while those in “authority” have a rightful charge to decide, to lead, and sometimes to enforce decisions. We speak of “spheres” of authority and “centers” of power, and we think in terms of vertical hierarchies, of being “under” authority or of having authority “over” someone or something.

Authority and power have long been topics of discussion and a locus of struggle in philosophy and theology, but such struggle gained intensity and verve in the twentieth century and continues into the twenty-first. For ethicists, both secular and theological, questions concerning who or what has legitimate authority, including moral authority, loom large. Philosopher Charles Taylor observes that people in modern secularized societies differ from those in earlier contexts—for example, those of the Scriptures and the early church, the medieval church, and even the churches of the Reformation—in the ways people imagine themselves in relation to authority and in the ways we picture what it means to have power or resist it. No longer do people assume that temporal powers directly correspond to supernatural ones, or that earthly power or office signifies divine appointment or delegation.

In every generation there will be voices counseling obedience to authorities, ecclesial and secular. But the more nuanced and interesting stances have come from those in the trajectory of the apostle Peter, who, in the face of imperial prohibition of his teaching ministry, declared, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” ([Acts 5:29](#)). This has been a pivotal question: how do we discern in the moment whose

authority is legitimate and when established structures should be resisted or reformed? Moreover, as the Christian gospel has spread around the globe, new voices and perspectives on Christian ethics and scriptural interpretation have entered the conversation. Significant shifts have come from those theorists offering critiques of power and querying dominant authorities. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover the entire global spectrum, but this article does focus on contemporary critical voices, some of them from the “margins.”

Authority and Power in Scripture

The biblical narratives turn time and again to stories of struggle around authority and power. In the biblical witness, God has ultimate authoritative power. In the beginning, God speaks, and the world is created. In relationships with creation and with people, God displays the character of completely legitimate, loving authority graciously wielded. Through steadfast love (*hesed*) God demonstrates noncoercive exercise of power that is trustworthy and just. The narratives also tell of misused power and illegitimate authority: false prophets and ungodly generals, judges, kings, and priests. In stark contrast, Jesus comes humbly exercising divine power on behalf of others.

Old Testament. In the grand narrative of the OT, God displays authority and power via various roles: father and mother, lawgiver and judge, shepherd and gardener, king, warrior, conqueror, deliverer, authoritative voice. In each role, the distinctive character of God’s authority and power is displayed. The voice of God speaks, and creation responds. As household head, God provides powerful nurturing, blessing, and honor. As judge, God distinguishes the righteous from

p 85 the unrighteous, the just from unjust, and pronounces consequences for actions. As shepherd, God gives powerful guidance and protection. The military commander God wages war on the unjust, defends the cause of the poor and oppressed, and makes a safe place in which his people may dwell in *shalom*. The OT God as authorizing power delegates responsibilities to human beings: Adam is empowered to name the animals and to care for the garden; Abraham to father a nation set aside for God; priests to bless and intercede; judges to mediate; kings and governors to rule; military leaders to command; prophets to speak.

Moses preeminently embodies God-given authority characterized by several of these key roles: he is a shepherd, lawgiver, mediator, judge, general, and prophet. As the narrative progresses, questions arise: shall the people of God have a temporal king? How will the power of an unjust or ungodly king be confronted and circumscribed? There is perennial strife between priestly temple authorities and other temporal structures. More prophets arise, and while the false ones coddle ungodly rulers, godly prophets speak truth to power and to the people. Thus, the prophetic voice becomes an authoritative channel of divine correction and guidance. Throughout the grand narrative God's steadfast love (*hesed*) remains a major OT theme, the prevailing character of God's power and authority. That power is displayed as God liberates his people from bondage, and continues as God announces and demonstrates his purpose to heal the nations, to re-create and redeem humankind and indeed all of creation.

New Testament. Jesus is the Lord (*kyrios*, "ruler"), the king, the new Moses—both prophet and priest. He wields Spirit-authorized power (*dynamis*, "power") as he confronts earthly and cosmic powers. His healing ministry displays authority over material and spiritual powers

and restores marginalized individuals to honorable places in their families and communities. Thus familial structures are recast, tyrannical political power is defanged or relativized, and oppressive religious authorities are confronted (Luke 20:45–21:4). A question arises: by what authority (*exousia*, “authority”) is Jesus doing these things (Mark 11:28)? In the process of making disciples, Jesus models authoritative, gentle shepherding of God’s people. He displays noncoercive power and authority that invites and does not force, that frees and then empowers. New associations are formed, and new power and authority structures are built, as the new family of God is to be governed by love that is self-giving (*agapē*) and fraternal (*philadelphia*).

The NT Epistles evidence struggles among early Christians regarding how to define and exercise their new power and authority within the church, in the face of established temporal authorities (temple and empire), and in a world full of spiritual “authorities” and “powers.” Paul’s teaching that Christ’s rule is total and preeminent (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16) fits the ancient Near Eastern conceptual world, in which earthly authorities correspond to—mirror and express—cosmic, supernatural powers (Eph. 1:21; 2:2; 6:12). In his character and message, the apostle Paul follows Jesus’ example of self-giving leadership and of empowering the lowly (1 Cor. 1:26b–29). Paul urges believers to rely on the power of God (*en dynamei theou* [1 Cor. 2:5]); on this power the church is founded. And Paul wishes to pattern his own ministry and the shape of the church on the example of Jesus Christ’s humble obedience (Phil. 2:5–11).

Authority and Power in Contemporary Ethics

In twentieth-century Christian ethics, authority and power came to be seen as matters of personal and group identity and agency strongly

flavored by sociopolitical and economic factors, and Scripture often was interpreted in that light as well. Social analysts noticed effects of dominative power—“power-over”—but they also pointed to its transformative capacity, and in ethics these social theories, especially conflict theories, shaped the focal moral questions. Accordingly, the next sections review some key secular theories, then trace their influence in contemporary Christian ethics of power and authority. Readers desiring to move beyond the thumbnail sketches provided here would do well to consult *Comprehending Power in Christian Social Ethics*, Christian social ethicist Christine Firer Hinze’s more complete survey and assessment.

Influential social theories. The vision that philosopher and social scientist Karl Marx (1818–83) had of ideal society implies a normative judgment that dominative power over others is illegitimate and ultimately will wane as the people find and assert their collective power. Marx’s penetrating critiques of oppressive power-over, especially in capitalist systems, so focused attention on the systemic social and economic aspects of power that today the concepts of power and authority are almost invariably framed in those terms, even by non-Marxist thinkers.

German lawyer, political economist, and sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) raised questions about the nature of social power and of the place of the individual agent in the modern rationalized, p
86 “disenchanted” world that has undergone “demagicalization.” For him, rationalization itself is the greatest force shaping life in the modern world—the force that dictates that the norms for actions will be based on measurability, systematicity, and effectiveness. Many Christian ethicists work with or adapt Weber’s taxonomy of social authority, which

identifies certain ideal types categorized according to their spheres of authority.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906–75) distinguished between authority and power and saw legitimate, positive power in the human capacity to “act in concert” rather than via coercive command and lockstep obedience (Arendt 143). Arendt thus departed from the Western philosophical tradition, which she thought framed power as rule, hierarchical power-over. Arendt grounded her view of authority in the ancient Roman concept of *auctoritas*, authority foundational to a community and arising out of character, wisdom, and skill rather than relying on coercion or persuasion (Hinze 140). As Arendt critiqued contemporary society, she saw almost no structures operating in the public sphere with noncoercive authority.

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84) shifted analyses of power away from the market and property metaphors, by which it was viewed as a substance of measurable and exchangeable commodity (Hinze 113). By contrast, Foucault pointed to “power relations,” dynamic and multifaceted forces that operate in human societies, with potential for positive transformative impact. He saw power as operant in human relations at a personal level but even more significantly at systemic, social, and political structural levels, where it manages to subjugate and direct people’s actions. Foucault thought that freedom from repressive and abusive power relationships comes only via awareness and resistance.

Power and authority in twentieth-century Christian ethics. Twentieth-century Christian ethicists and theologians interacted with these and other secular sociopolitical theories to develop Christian perspectives on the roles of individual agents in communities and in the

political arena. Analyses of power relations and the nature of legitimate authority were key topics.

In the 1930s, French Roman Catholic neo-Thomist and personalist philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), whose ideas became influential especially in Latin America, developed a distinctively Christian vision of the common good created when power and authority structures enable whole persons—spiritual and material beings with relationships to God—to flourish. In his vision, power-over can be beneficent when authorities recognize the sovereignty of God and adhere to proper norms, and in that case they have a right to be obeyed. When political authorities become oppressive or self-serving, they fail to fulfill their proper, essential roles and are rendered illegitimate.

The emergence of fascism in Europe presented exactly the kind of challenge that Maritain's ethic attempted to address. The divine command ethic of Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) was forged and tempered in that context as well. The Barmen Declaration, which Barth drafted, declares Jesus Lord ("Führer"), pointedly rejecting "other lords." German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a student of Barth, wrestled with how to maintain a faithful church even in Nazi Germany. He thought it important to distinguish between spheres of authority, to separate the church from the world. While Bonhoeffer strove against the secular kingdom in which he lived, he prized and cultivated the life of the Confessing Church, within whose fellowship he counseled humility and gentleness. Bonhoeffer acted on his convictions as he chose to participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler, for which the Third Reich executed him.

In the wake of World War II, Christian theologians assessed the churches' roles in the buildup of the Third Reich and the execution of

that conflict. German theologian Dorothee Sölle said that it was no longer appropriate to found a Christian ethic on the concept of obedience to authority and asked, “Is it possible to imagine a moral philosopher or theologian who would use the word ‘obedience’ as if nothing had happened?... The dangers of the religious ideology of obedience do not end when religion itself loses its spell and binding power. The Nazi ideology with its antireligious leanings proves the point that after disenchantment of the world, to use Max Weber’s phrase, there is still domination and unquestioned authority and obedience” (Sölle x, xiii). Sölle called for a historically aware, contextualized theological ethic of power and authority grounded in Jesus’ example of the self-aware yet selfless human being free to live for others.

For German American Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965), the concept of power is linked with core theological issues of the nature of human identity (*imago Dei*) and the nature of reality itself (ontology). Love and justice are foundational relations, and both are fundamental to redemptive power. Beginning with the Genesis story of the fall of humankind, Tillich sees a human p 87 tendency toward conflict and abuse of power resulting from the estrangement accompanying the exposure of our finitude, our lack of omnipotence and omniscience. Tillich critiqued other Christian ethicists for missing the relationship between power and love; he envisioned “creative justice” issuing from a collective life where in particular situations love, power, and formal justice were applied, symbolized by the (transhistorical, immanent) kingdom of God. Still, he recognized a tragic necessity in human life for hierarchies and social structures that will at times be coercive (Hinze 202–3). Tillich’s analysis of power and authority was influential in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr., and it has traces

in the thought of some Christian feminists.

American Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) saw political will to power as both pervasive and potentially malevolent, rooted in human pride and ego assertion. As with Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr’s model for Christian participation in the sociopolitical arena was colored by a Lutheran two-kingdoms theology in which there is unavoidable tension between life in the secular world and life in the kingdom of God. He saw God’s spirit working within history but cautioned that progress toward realization of the kingdom would be slow. Niebuhr spoke of kingdom ethics as an “impossible possibility” (Niebuhr 2:246–47).

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68) wrote, “Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice” (King 37). Grounding his call for social justice in scriptural mandates and images, and steeped in personalist theology and the thought of Tillich and Niebuhr, King articulated a version of Black Power that critiqued both “immoral power” and “powerless morality.” Properly fused, power, love, and justice could be transformative.

Liberation perspectives on power and authority. The final three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the development of liberation theologies in response to oppressive social and political conditions and structures. These theologies from the “underside” focus attention on concrete social, economic, cultural, and relational contexts and seek to critique the power relations operative in each sphere. For liberationists, the central moral problem is systemic oppression in its particular local form, not a formal, theoretical problem or difficulty with belief in the modern era, as it was for Tillich and Niebuhr.

For Peruvian Dominican priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928), biblical grounding for the call to liberation is deep in the exodus story and the kingdom of God, which Jesus announced and ushered in. God is on the side of the poor, working for their liberation, and Christians are accordingly called to solidarity with and action on behalf of the oppressed. The crisis of oppression has spiritual, institutional, and historical dimensions, and the liberating solidarity and praxis called for will also need to address each of those spheres. Similarly, Argentine Methodist theologian José Míguez Bonino speaks of “the active solidarity of love” that empowers the oppressed to break free from dominative and dependent social, economic, and political arrangements. Cuban American ethicist Miguel De La Torre says, “Solidarity that comes from making an option for the poor is crucial not because Christ is *with* the marginalized but, rather, Christ *is* the marginalized. In the words of the Apostle Paul, ‘Remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who for [our] sake, although rich became poor, so that [we] might become rich through the poverty of that One’ (2 Cor. 8:9)” (De La Torre 57).

In the vision of Christian feminist ethicists, the notion of authority is revised and recast. Patriarchal and sexist authority structures and assumptions of power are rejected in favor of egalitarian models. For American Baptist womanist ethicist Emilie Townes (b. 1955), “The concept of power that comes from decision and responsibility is one that entails the ability to effect change and to work with others. This power requires openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change” (Townes 86). Letty Russell (1930–2007) wrote of empowerment of individuals in concert with others and of power that authorizes legitimate power: “Authority might be understood as legitimate power only when it opens the way to inclusiveness and wholeness in the household of

faith” (Russell 61). Moreover, willingness “to work for God’s covenant purpose of justice, *shalom*” is what qualifies people for inclusion in the power circle (Russell 36). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938) moves the description and discussion of power beyond power-over associated with empire to “power for,” affecting transformation. Beverly Harrison (b. 1932), influenced by her teacher Reinhold Niebuhr, offered a Christian feminist power analysis: “Evil is the consequence of disparities of power because where disparity of power is great, violence or control by coercion is the dominant mode of social interaction. Evil, on this reading, is the active or passive effort to deny or suppress p 88 another’s power-of-being-in-relation. When power disparities are great, those ‘in charge’ cease to have to be accountable to those less powerful for what they do. Societies in which ... some groups have vast and unchecked power and others are denied even the power of survival, are unjust societies” (Harrison 154–55). Harrison cautioned, “We act together and find our good in each other and in God, and our power grows together, or we deny our relation and reproduce a violent world where no one experiences holy power” (Harrison 41).

See also [Autonomy](#); [Conquest](#); [Egalitarianism](#); [Equality](#); [Liberation](#); [Liberationist Ethics](#); [Powers and Principalities](#); [Resistance Movements](#); [Submission and Subordination](#); [Tyranny](#)

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Bonnie Howe