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Religious Authority, Religious Leadership, or Leadership of a Religious Organisation – Same Difference? An effort in Clarification.¹

In 2014 I started working on a research project called “Processes of attribution of religious authority and the role of gender in these processes”. This project originates in – and is a development of – my long standing interest in questions such as “how do the voice, the (religious and theological) ideas, and the religious and theological worldview of women become authoritative, especially those that are perceived as new, unheard of, other, or different.” “How do they become tradition, passed on from one generation to the other?” Or “Why do words spoken by the one become canonical and the words from another person do not.”² These questions illuminate my intention to approach the issue of “religious authority” from a sexual-difference perspective, with a special focus on the deployment of a “horizon”, an “objective” to offer orientation and direction to the realisation of the irreducible difference of female-feminine subjectivity. This tendency can be explained by the influence brought about by my long study of the work of Luce Irigaray.³ However, the issues are also

¹ I want to thank the members of the Onderzoekseminar of the PTHU-Groningen for their comments upon earlier versions of this text, the ABC-Autorinnen for inspiring discussions in which I learned much, and especially Magda Misset-van de Weg for her encouragements during the different stages of the development of this research project.

² On the issue of (religious) authority, see Anne-Claire Mulder, “Introduction,” in: *Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (Peeters: Leuven 2004)*, 12, 5-11; Anne-Claire Mulder et al., “De weg van de aanbeveling... Exploratief onderzoek naar de doorwerking van de aanbevelingen van de oecumenische vrouwensynodes”. (unpublished document); Anne-Claire Mulder, Mathilde van Dijk, and Angela Berlis, “Gender in Theology and Religion: a Success-Story?! Report from a Conference,” in: *Journal of the European Society for Women in Theological Research (Peeters: Leuven 2013)*, 21, 99-117.

³ See for instance Anne-Claire Mulder, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word. “Incarnation” as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian’s Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Work* (Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam 2006); Anne-Claire Mulder, “An Ethics of the In-Between: A condition of Possibility of Being and Living Together,” in: Pamela Sue Anderson (ed.), *New*

pertinent for the acknowledgement and recognition of queer and/or post-colonial voices, actually for all those voices that struggle to be heard when they speak of their religious ideas, their faith; the voices of those who struggle to become acknowledged and recognised as speaking (of) God.⁴

The questions raised in the first lines of this introduction illuminate that I understand granting someone authority as a dynamic process at work in a relation between two persons or a person and a religious text or religious body. The research project mentioned shall focus on the dynamics within this process through empirical research, in an attempt to find out what forms of expression this process of granting authority can take, what motivates persons to attribute religious authority to a person or text, what are the circumstances in which this happens, what is the length of the authority relation between the one and the other, et cetera.

Granted, speaking of the attribution of (religious) authority and depicting this as a relational process is the effect of a certain interpretation of the term “religious authority”. Preliminary discussions of the research plans made it clear that many people do not associate the term “religious authority” with a relational process, but rather with the assignment of the leader of a religious organisation – be it ordained or not – to lead the community spiritually. Thus, “religious authority” was understood to refer to “religious leadership”. Others associated the term “religious authority” with the power to command or exact obedience which goes hand in hand with the leadership of a religious organisation; it was then connected with hierarchical relationships, especially with relations of domination.⁵

This paper aims to show the distinctions and similarities between these different interpretations of the term “religious authority”. The first part maps the different sources that contributed to the understanding of the term “religious authority” as a relational process in which authority is attributed. The second part presents a description of the genealogy of religious authority associated with the leadership of a religious organisation. The conclusion then delineates

Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion. Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate (Feminist Philosophy Collection) (Springer: Dordrecht/ London 2010), 297-318.

⁴ See Ina Praetorius, „Von Gott Sprechen. Als Frau. Nach der Aufklärung,“ in: *Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* (Peeters: Leuven 2004), 12, 77-90.

⁵ These interpretations of “religious authority” were also voiced in two group discussions held at two different occasions with members of the ESWTR, first in May 2015, with members of the Romanian section of the ESWTR living in and nearby Cluj, and second with participants of the 16th International Conference of the ESWTR held in Crete in August 2015.

the relevance of this exercise in clarification of the two interpretations of religious authority for the understanding of issues of authority and leadership *per se*, and of the role of gender in these issues.

“Religious Authority” as a Relational Concept

Authority

A number of texts and passages have been very influential for the interpretation of religious authority as a dynamic and relational process presented here. One of the most influential texts has been “Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew Scripture,” by Claudia Camp.⁶ Here, authority is not understood as *power over* others, but as something “*freely granted*” by someone to a person or a book.⁷ This means that no one loses her or his freedom in an authority relation.

A second text which piqued my interest was an interview with Luce Irigaray, in which the praxis of *affidamento* or “entrustment”, a praxis of cultivating the relations of women among themselves, was discussed.⁸ This praxis is further discussed in a book published by The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, dealing with their own political praxis and reflections.⁹ In this book, members of the Collective describe how through the reading and discussing of literary classics by women authors in their women’s groups, inequalities within the group were discovered: the voice and ideas of one or several women within the group were favored over those of others. These voices were granted authority because the ideas were thought more important, more fruitful than others. Reflecting upon the nature of this “more”, they discovered that these interpretations touched the desire or yearning of those present for (a certain form of) female subjectivity, and/or that they offered some orientation.¹⁰ From this discovery, they developed a praxis of entrustment, of entrusting oneself to the authority of another woman, “who thus becomes guide, mentor, or point

⁶ Claudia V. Camp, “Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew Scripture,” in: Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (eds.), *Embodied Love. Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values* (Harper and Row: San Francisco 1987), 97-113.

⁷ Camp, “Female Voice, Written Word,” 98 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Zur Geschlechterdifferenz. Interviews und Vorträge*. (Wiener Frauenverlag: Wien 1987), Frauenforschung Band 5, 118-137, here 124-130.

⁹ The Milan’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference. A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, (Indiana University Press: Bloomington 1990).

¹⁰ Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference*, 108-113.

of reference – in short – a figure of mediation between her and the world.”¹¹ As one of the examples of this praxis of *affidamento*, they refer to Ruth and Naomi. Ruth “decided to entrust herself to Naomi and Naomi, after trying to dissuade her, accepted her.”¹²

A third important source of this view of authority is the entry on “authority” in the *ABC des guten Lebens* [the ABC of the good Life], the first draft of which was discussed by the collective of ABC-Autorinnen.¹³ This text is closely related to the ideas of the Italian philosophers discussed above, as the authors have been engaged in reading, translating, and commenting upon the work of a number of Italian feminist philosophers, some of whom also belong to the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective.¹⁴ This text describes authority as follows:

Autorität ist eine Qualität, die innerhalb von Beziehungen zirkuliert. Autorität entsteht immer dann, wenn jemand die Worte oder Anregungen einer anderen Person bedeutsam findet und ihnen Wert zumisst. Ob jemand für mich Autorität hat, erkenne ich daran, dass ihr oder sein Urteil mir wichtig ist, auch wenn ich damit nicht übereinstimme [...] Autorität folgt nicht zwangsläufig aus einer bestimmten Eigenschaft – etwa objektiver Sachkenntnis oder besonderen Fähigkeiten – sondern sie korrespondiert mit dem Begehren derjenigen, die sie anerkennt. Das ist in der Regel dann der Fall, wenn das, was jemand sagt (oder tut oder schreibt) dabei hilft, dem eigenen Begehren zu folgen. Wer Autorität hat, inspiriert, bringt auf neue Ideen, fordert heraus, ermutigt oder zeigt bisher unbekannte Möglichkeiten auf. Genau deshalb kann Autorität große Wirksamkeit entfalten, denn sie bewegt Menschen dazu, sich zu verändern, etwas Neues anzufangen, ihre bisherigen Standpunkte zu überdenken und sich weiterzuentwickeln.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 8/9.

¹² Ibid., 119.

¹³ Ursula Knecht et al., *ABC des guten Lebens* (Christel Göttert Verlag: Rüsselsheim 2012), 25-27. (also found at <https://abcdesgutenlebens.wordpress.com>. The authors of this *ABC* now call themselves the ABC-Autorinnen.

¹⁴ From the ABC-Autorinnen, Antje Schrupp and Dorothee Markert-Knüfer in particular are important mediators of the thoughts of Italian philosophers as translators and commentators. See for instance Diotima, *Jenseits der Gleichheit. Über Macht und die weiblichen Wurzeln der Autorität* (Ulrike Helmer Verlag: Königstein/Taunus 1999).

¹⁵ Knecht et al., *ABC*, 25/26. “Authority is a quality that circulates within relationships. Authority comes about in those instances when someone considers the words or suggestions of another person to be meaningful and valuable. I realise whether someone has authority for me by the fact that her or his judgement is important to me, even if I do not agree [...] Authority does not follow necessarily from a certain characteristic – like objective expertise or special skills –

This description emphasises that authority is an aspect or dimension of a relation, between two persons or between a person and the words or the life of another person. Thus, an authority – someone who helps to follow one’s yearning – can also present itself in the form of a text or an exemplary life. The last possibility explains the turn to female mystics as Teresa von Avila or Hildegard von Bingen in the context of discussing female authority.¹⁶ It also illuminates that the relational exchanges are not focussed on the relation itself, but that it is directed at the development of the one who entrusts herself to the judgement of the other, to her intellectual and spiritual growth, her growth in self-confidence.

The dynamics of this authority relation between two persons is thus that the one seen as an authority for the other constitutes a reference point; a “voice” offering direction and authorising the one who entrusts herself to this reference point in her enterprises: offering her the energy to straighten her back, to step out of her comfort zone in an as yet unknown territory, in the knowledge that she has the backing of the other, thus “realizing what she (or he) is capable of being,” to use an expression of Luce Irigaray.¹⁷ That does not mean that she has to follow this authority in her (or his) footsteps.¹⁸ For this relationship

it corresponds rather with the yearning (or desire) of the person, that acknowledges this authority. That is usually the case when that what someone says (or does or writes), helps to follow one’s own yearning/desire. The one who has authority inspires, evokes new ideas, prompts, encourages or shows hitherto unknown possibilities. Precisely for that reason authority can be greatly effective, because it moves persons to change themselves, to start something new, to rethink their current views or standpoints and to develop themselves further” (My translation here and henceforth).

¹⁶ See for instance Diana Sartori, “Warum Teresa,” in: Diotima und andere, *Die Welt zur Welt Bringen. Politik, Geschlechterdifferenz und die Arbeit am Symbolischen* (Ulrike Helmer Verlag: Königstein/Taunus 1999), 87-118; Andrea Günter, “Weibliche Autorität dank Durchsetzungskraft, prophetische Begabung und leidenschaftlicher Gottes- und Weltliebe – Mysterikerinnen als Denkerinnen von Frauenpolitik am Beispiel Hildegard von Bingen,” in: Andrea Günter, *Weibliche Autorität, Freiheit und Geschlechterdifferenz. Bausteine einer feministischen politischen Theorie* (Ulrike Helmer Verlag: Königstein/Taunus 1996), 107-129. See also Andrea Günter, *Frauen vor Bilder, FrauenVorbilder. Die Weibliche Suche nach Orientierung* (Christel Göttert Verlag: Rüsselsheim 2003).

¹⁷ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (Columbia University Press: New York 1993), 61.

¹⁸ I insert here the words “or he” between brackets, because I came across a quote from Luisa Muraro, one of the theoreticians of the *affidamento*-relation, in an internet article by Dorothee Markert, in which Muraro writes that this kind of relation was already present in the relations between men and between many women and men, but that these kinds of relations between women were rare. Dorothee Markert, „Affidamento – sich dem Urteil einer anderen Frau

does not rob her of her freedom or responsibility to decide for herself what course to follow. But as they are in this *affidamento* relation, she will only do that after careful consideration of what the other is saying.¹⁹ This illuminates that in entrusting oneself to the direction or judgement of the other, one cannot expect “to receive only affirmation, support or encouragement” but occasionally also critical questioning of what one is doing.²⁰ And this in turn shows that the one who is entrusted with the trust of the other in her judgement and direction, who thus has become the authority in this relation, must “be ready to take up the authority that is attributed to her and to risk passing judgement or give direction.”²¹

This description of the dynamic of authority relations also illuminates what this relation asks for, namely “reflexive practitioners”. To live up to its basic characteristic, notably enabling the practitioners “to grow”, it asks for careful reflection upon the inner dynamic of the relations: for instance upon the thin line between “authority” and undue influence or the exertion of power from the one in the position of authority; or– upon the thin line between taking the other as authority – for example upon a path to realise something one wants to realise oneself – and idealising this other, longing to imitate her, to become like her. When these lines are crossed, when “authority” has become the exertion of power, when “authority” becomes an object of desire or envy, when authority relation no longer stimulates the growth of the practitioners, then “the fundamental interconnectedness between true authority and the giving of life” is broken.²²

Religious Authority

Words such as “growth”, “life-giving”, “thriving”, or “flourishing” give expression to an ideal, an image of a life in dignity and peace, an image of the good life. This particular ideal or image of the horizon is expressed or

anvertrauen.“ (<http://www.bzw-weiterdenken.de/2011/04/affidamento-sich-dem-urteil-einer-anderen-frau-anvertrauen>, 31 October 2015). This remark by Muraro affirmed my own intuition that the process of attribution of authority can be studied not only in relations between women, but in all kind of relations.

¹⁹ For an example of this dynamic, see Dorothee Markert, *Wachsen Am MEHR Anderer Frauen. Vorträge über Begehren, Dankbarkeit und Politik* (Christel Göttert Verlag: Rüsselsheim 2002), 202-205.

²⁰ Knecht et al., *ABC*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Camp, “Female Voice, Written Word,” 111.

embedded in a wealth of texts, pictures and practices, a narrative matrix,²³ and as such constitutes a living tradition as well as a standard by which to adjudicate the experiences and conditions of everyday life. It can also be understood as transcending the here and now as well as the quotidian, in the sense that it points beyond the experiences of the everyday life towards different options to live the good life.

Following Luce Irigaray's picture of the notion of "horizon", this (image on the) horizon is both an objective and an object of this political process. As an objective, it constitutes the goal that offers direction to the political process. As an object, it is the object of exchange, the "third" in the communication between the one and the other; that which connects them as the object of their communication and that which separates them or differentiates them from each other, as in the case of disagreement about what good life would look like.²⁴ Irigaray also points out that the image on the horizon that mobilises our individual or collective yearning or desire to realise this can be called "divine", because it constitutes "the absolute" or "ultimate" for us, the essence of our existence. As such this horizon is religious, even when the words "God" or "divine" are not used as the *chiffre* for this absolute and ultimate. For it offers both sense and meaning to the disparate experiences of this lived existence and a standard by which to examine again what is happening and to discover what is good or bad.²⁵

However, this sense of what constitutes the absolute and ultimate of our existence must be re-examined and actualised time and again. This implies a conscientious re-examination of the traditions in which this image of the divine of us and for us is embedded. This re-examination can produce new, different, unheard-of images of the divine especially when the stories-we-live-by are re-examined from a location in the margins. This process generates or "authors" a different order or cohesion in the disparate experiences of human

²³ Knecht et al., «Matrix», *ABC*, 98-100.

²⁴ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 57-72. For an interpretation of Luce Irigaray's notion of "horizon" see Mulder, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word*, 167-174.

²⁵ This interpretation of "religion" is inspired by Irmgard Busch's two etymological interpretations of the word. According to Busch, religion understood as "binding together" goes back to the Latin verb *religare*, but "religion can also be traced back to the Latin verb *relegere* which renders an interpretation of religion as 'conscientious', as knowing and discovering what is good and bad." See Irmgard Busch, "Religie," in: Hedy D'Ancona et al. (eds.), *Vrouwenlexicon. Tweehonderd jaar emancipatie van A tot Z* (Het Spectrum: Utrecht 1989), 324-325.

existence, a different picture of what is the meaning and value of life and how to live it.

The outcome of this process needs to be “authorised” however to become (part of) a living and life-giving tradition; in other words, this image of the absolute and ultimate needs to be recognised, acknowledged and affirmed as “authoritative”, as a true and to-be-trusted (religious) point of orientation. This raises the question “who is responsible for this authorising?” Or, to formulate the question differently, “who is the religious authority authorising an image of the divine of and for us as true or trustworthy?”

The picture of “authority” described above does not provide such a clear-cut answer to this question, because what goes for “authority”, also goes for “religious authority”. Religious authority is also attributed to someone whose words or ideas are experienced as meaningful and valuable by someone else. In this case it concerns her or his “speaking (of) God”, or her or his words or ideas about the absolute or ultimate of human existence. This process of attributing religious authority to her or his words and ideas places her or him in the position of religious authority, makes her or him a religious authority, someone turned to for advice when needing to judge a situation in light of the religious tradition. This means that religious authority is dynamic and not fixed, circulating and not limited to (persons in) certain positions or to the ordained.

This interpretation of religious authority is different, however, from the dominant one, in which it is indeed seen as fixed and limited to certain positions, most often the position of the leader of a religious organisation, be it ordained or not. The following part shall present an account of the coming about of this understanding of religious authority.

Religious Authority: Leader of a Religious Organisation?

In mapping the genealogy of the recurrent identification of religious authority with leadership of a religious organisation, Hannah Arendt’s text “What is Authority” is a good starting point.²⁶ This text has been influential for the women of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Kathleen Jones, the ABC-Autorinnen, and other writers.²⁷ Arendt’s text is relevant because she

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?” in: Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought. With an introduction by Jerome Kohn* (Penguin Classic: New York 1961/2006), 91-141.

²⁷ See for example Paul Verhaeghe, *Autoriteit* (De Bezige Bij: Amsterdam 2015).

describes the authoritarian relation that dominates our thinking about authority and argues that this particular form of authoritarian relation is mediated through the ages by the teachings of the Church and has thus influenced the present understanding of religious authority. This last argument brings to mind the description of the development and tensions in the history of ordination mentioned in an article by Barbara Brown Zikmund.²⁸ Another book is *Compassionate Authority* by Kathleen Jones.²⁹ Whereas Arendt describes the development of the concept of authority from antiquity to modernity, Jones' description of authority starts with modernity. Taken together, their books give a broad historical sketch of the genealogy of our contemporary thoughts on authority and leadership.

In a marked distinction from Jones' book on authority, Arendt's text does not address the gendered nature of the political theories on authority she discusses, although it becomes clear from the picture she paints that the form of authority she discusses is "patriarchal authority" or "the authority of the fathers". A similar remark can be made with respect to the history of ordination described by Brown Zikmund. In her depiction of this history, the gendered nature of the different steps in the development is not discussed, but presupposed. It is then addressed in the rest of her text, where she discusses how first and second generation ordained female ministers relate to this history of ordination and change the dominant understanding of the ordained ministry.

Hannah Arendt on Authority

In "What is Authority," Arendt discusses the crisis, even the loss of authority in the political realm. She opens her text with the thesis that: "[...] authority has vanished from the modern world."³⁰ She moderates this thesis by explaining that it is a specific form of authority that we have lost; one which has been valid in the Western world throughout a long time.³¹ One of the manifestations of this loss is that authority is often misunderstood as the exertion of power

²⁸ Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Ministry of Word and Sacrament: Women and Changing understandings of Ordination," in: Milton J. Coater, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks (eds.), *The Presbyterian predicament: Six Perspectives* (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville Kentucky 1990), 134-159.

²⁹ Kathleen B. Jones, *Compassionate Authority. Democracy and the Representation of Women* (Routledge: New York 1993).

³⁰ Arendt, "What is authority," 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92. Although Arendt does not say it, one can assume from her description that it is precisely the patriarchal form of authority that is disappearing. See also Verhaeghe, *Autoriteit*, 58.

over others, and is thus connected with obedience through coercion. Arendt, however, writes that “the authoritarian relation between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognise and where both have their predetermined stable place.”³²

Thus, what has got lost is the recognition of the rightness and legitimacy of this hierarchy; a loss Arendt attributes to the general doubt that was introduced in modernity, and which first undermined tradition, subsequently religion, and now has entered the political realm.³³

In order to clarify the political discussions on authority held in the 1950s, in which, according to Arendt, important distinctions between authoritarian, dictatorial and totalitarian were blurred, she draws a genealogy of the origins of this lost concept of authority. Her genealogy starts with Plato’s reflection upon the way in which the political process of negotiation about the general interest among free men could be ordered. Plato introduced “the laws” as a way of governing the *polis*. These represent an authority that can be obeyed while free men retain their freedom. Plato considered these laws to be an expression of Reason, and presented the philosophers as best suited to govern the *polis* due to their philosophical and reflective expertise, their contemplation of Reason and concomitant ideas of the good and the true. Implicit in this presentation of the laws is that the law’s authority is rooted in their transcendent character: they are presented as part of the world of the ideas, and as such, as a measure of the good and the true.³⁴ This is offered as the reason that the citizens of the *polis* should obey the laws. However, to solve the dilemma that not all citizens (can) contemplate Reason and thus obey its laws out of their reasonable acquiescence, Plato introduced in *The Republic* a myth of rewards and punishments in an hereafter, or a form of hell.³⁵ What becomes clear from this description is that Plato’s idea of the authority of the law goes hand in hand with a dichotomy between seers, theoreticians, thinkers, and/or authorities – experts – and doers, those who obey the authorities, which happen to be all those who are responsible for the continuity of life itself and the life of the

³² *Ibid.*, 93.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

polis – the members of the household of free men, women, children, slaves as well as the artisans and craftsmen.³⁶

Aristotle reinforced the hierarchy within the authority relation which Plato introduced, by invoking the “natural” difference between younger and older persons as a justification of the difference between those who rule and those who obey.³⁷

The thoughts of Plato and Aristotle on authority in a political context, notably their conception of authority as a structure of obedience to laws and institutes by both authorities and subjects, are still influential in contemporary thinking, due to the fact that the Romans made them into “ancestors” when “[they] felt they needed *founding* fathers and authoritative examples in matters of thought and ideas,” and thus preserved their thoughts and theories as an authoritative tradition.”³⁸

According to Arendt, the Romans based authority in the political realm in the tradition of the foundation of their city and connected it with the religious reverence of the (guidance of the) ancestors. She writes: “At the heart of Roman politics [...] stands the conviction of the sacredness of *foundation*, in the sense that once something was founded it remains binding, for all future generations.”³⁹ This means that the Roman political enterprise was directed at preserving this foundation and bringing this founded city to prosperity, to augmentation. This political enterprise was also a religious one, in the etymological sense of the word *religare*, “binding back”. For the preservation and augmentation of the foundation was conceived as tying the present back to this past, for instance through practices as the consultation of the ancestors, the founders of the city, with respect to course and events of the present. These ancestors were asked by the eldest, the Senate, for guidance, for direction in the present and for a standard with respect to what would contribute to the prosperity of the city.⁴⁰ They were given this authority because of their connection with the ancestors. Thus, their authority in voicing the offered guidance and direction in the present was rooted in the past, in particular in the authority of the ancestors. This picture of the place of authority and of those in or with authority in the Roman political life, illuminates that authority

³⁶ Ibid., 115.

³⁷ Ibid., 116.

³⁸ Ibid., 124 (my emphasis).

³⁹ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 121-123.

is closely connected with “tradition” and “religion”. As Arendt writes, “to act without authority and tradition, without accepted, time-honored standards and models, without the help of the wisdom of the founding fathers, was inconceivable.”⁴¹

According to Arendt, this Roman matrix of thought about the relevance and authority of tradition for the present, with the concomitant effort to actualise the past in the present or to interpret the present by turning to the past and to tradition, has been preserved in and by the Christian Church from the decline of the Roman Empire until far into modernity, when general doubt undermined first tradition and religion, and eventually authority. Arendt describes how the structure of the Roman tradition of thinking about authority was replicated in the Church after Constantine. The death and resurrection of Christ took the place of the sacred foundation. This foundational event was preserved in the testimony of the apostles who would become “‘the founding fathers’ of the Church, from whom she would derive her own authority as long as she handed down their testimony by way of tradition from generation to generation”.⁴² Plato’s influence was preserved in the idea that the source of the authority of ideas and rules concerning what was good and true – both in terms of conduct and conviction – was transcendent to the concrete and mundane, and revealed by revelation.⁴³ It was also preserved in the idea that obedience to (the religious and) political authority could be enforced with the threat of hell, with eternal suffering in the hereafter, which kept everyone in line until doubt undermined the belief in (this) hell.⁴⁴

Arendt’s depiction of the way in which the Roman matrix of thought about authority was continued in the Church’s thoughts and practices of authority is illuminating regarding the question of why we identify religious authority with “exerting power over”. It brings to mind the spiritual power wielded by ecclesial authorities over the psychological well-being of the faithful; a power that would bring them to obedience, to remain within the realm of tradition.

Arendt’s depiction also sheds light on the picture drawn by US theologian Barbara Brown Zikmund of the historical development of the ordained ministry and the way in which religious authority has become identical with ordained ministry. In her text “Ministry of Word and Sacrament: Women and Changing

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 125/126.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 128-135.

Understandings of Ordination,” she describes six developments or tensions in the history of ordination as a backdrop to her arguments about the way the ministry of women changes the understandings of ordination.⁴⁵

Brown Zikmund first explains that the practice by which the churches ordain their ministers, notably “the laying of hands”, was a common practice in the postexilic synagogue. Existing leaders laid on hands to bless a new generation of elders who were chosen, or set apart, for a special office. This practice was also used in the first church communities. These church communities, however, used the pattern of the patriarchal household to organise themselves, thus they had local leaders and followed local practices of organizing their “household”, and also received travelling apostles, evangelists and others. By the end of the second century, leadership of the church was consolidated around local elders and the bishop. Authority became a more formal matter. This consolidation marked the end of the previous situation in which local leadership was tempered by these travelling apostles, evangelists, and ambassadors, and there was a variety in the way leadership was organised.

Second, “ordination became a formal means of preserving the link between the apostolic witness (those who knew Jesus firsthand) and the ongoing institutional Church.”⁴⁶ At first, the apostolic witness was not linked to the leadership of the (local) church but to the gospel itself or to the way the community lived its life in the light of the gospel from generation to generation, or it was recognised as an aspect of the leadership of certain leaders. But after several centuries, an “apostolic succession” of ordained leaders was established to preserve apostolic witness.

This is an example of the manner in which the Church followed the Roman matrix of thinking about tradition and authority. Here, the sacredness of the foundational moment is preserved by making sure that the present witness is linked back to the witness of the founding fathers. Ordination authorises the words and acts of this leader as words and acts that actualise the apostolic witness for the present. The importance of this step in thinking about ordination and authority is explained by the following development.

⁴⁵ Brown Zikmund, “Ministry of Word and Sacrament,” 137- 143. Brown Zikmund writes that this reconstruction is based upon the work of Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (Crossroad Publishing & Co: New York 1985), 137 + 177 note 2.

⁴⁶ Brown Zikmund, “Ministry of Word and Sacrament,” 138.

For, third, “ordination was meant to protect the Church from heresy”.⁴⁷ The ministry of teaching and preaching thus became invested in the ordained leaders of the community. Using Arendt’s ideas on authority, this meant that “apostolic succession” became not only a formal means to preserve the link to the founding fathers. It was also used to distinguish between “true” and “false” witness, or to determine which actualisation of the witness of the fathers was directed at the augmentation of the faith of the community and which actualisations could not be authorised, should not be obeyed or followed, should even be labelled “heresy” with the concomitant threat of hell.

A fourth step in the development of the ordained ministry was linked to the civic responsibilities the Church obtained in the centuries after the decline of the Roman Empire.⁴⁸ Thus the ecclesiastical hierarchy not only kept the faith in times of unrest but upheld the stability of society in the face of chaos. Arendt acknowledges this political power of the Church and attributes it to its authority to threaten with excommunication or eternal suffering.

The other developments by which ordained ministers were the only ones who could celebrate the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, or forgive sins, set them further apart from the laity. This “setting apart” was theologically justified by explaining that through the laying of hands the priests received a special power, whereupon “through him the mysteries of the faith found expression.”⁴⁹

The protestant Reformation challenged the power and the tradition of the institutional Church and rejected, among others, the special status of the clergy, emphasising instead the priesthood of all believers.⁵⁰ Luther foregrounded moreover the faith of the individual believer as well as the Bible as sole authoritative source of the faith. Both positions imply a breach from the idea that only the clergy had knowledge of what was true and good, or that they were the only ones who stood in direct line with the Apostles, and could determine what was apostolic witness and what was heretical.

With respect to the status of the ordained ministry, the Reformers were ambiguous, however. They rejected this special status of the priesthood on the one hand, but held on to the idea that the offices were also divinely ordained. Thus, Calvin advocated that it was the congregation that invested the ministers with the authority to preach and minister the sacraments. This meant that the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 141-143.

local faith community was given power over the minister, (although ordination in a local congregation is also understood as an affirmation of God's call to the ministry by the call of a local faith community). On the other hand, Calvin seems to hold onto the special status of the ordained minister when he writes that after ordination "[a minister] was no longer his own master but devoted to the service of God and the Church. As ordained servant of the divine Word he no longer speaks or acts in his own name but in the name of God," or as a representative of Christ.⁵¹

Thus, ordination sets the minister apart from the community, or places him in a position across from the faith community, a fact symbolised by the position of the preacher in the pulpit facing the community from up high. Using Arendt's analysis of the foundation of authority and power clarifies, that Calvin's view of the power and authority of the ordained implies a shift from the idea that the authority of the ordained is based upon his place in the unbroken chain of apostolic witnesses towards the idea that the authority of the ordained minister lies in a transcendent power calling this person to serve it by representing it in person.

The Authority of the Leader

Arendt's picture of the genealogy of the notion of authority clarifies that authority was thought to be legitimised by God. In this discourse, secular and religious rulers could understand themselves as servants or representatives of the divine Authority, including the power to threaten with hell and damnation in order to enforce obedience to their authority. This legitimisation of the authority of the religious authorities is still present in the reflection on ordained ministry. In secular life, however, this discourse of the divinely ordained order of authority, whereby a King could understand his power as legitimised by divine Law, has lost its power in favour of a discourse about the strong leader.

The beginning of this discourse of the strong leader can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher of the social contract theory. Hobbes' point of departure was the contention that it was only possible to live together peacefully when everyone surrenders his (or her) freedom to pursue their own

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.16; quoted in Brown Zikmund, "Ministry of Word and Sacrament," 142. Calvin's formulation is oddly reminiscent of Plato's description of the relation between the ruler and the law: "The law is the despot of the ruler, and the ruler is the slave of the law." See Arendt, "What is Authority," 106.

interest in favour of the welfare of the larger group.⁵² A social contract signed by all would be the only way to prevent an all-against-all war. In this social contract, the participants sign away their freedom to realise their own interest to the sovereign, a *Leviathan*. By this contract, the sovereign is invested with the responsibility to take care of the welfare of the subjects as well as with the power to decide what is (in) the interest of all. The sovereign has, moreover, the authority to make sure that (t)his idea is realised, namely, that the subjects really subject themselves to the authority of the sovereign and obey him, or her.⁵³ Thus, authority is defined in the social contract theory as the exercise of sovereign, social control by legitimate rulers on behalf of the public welfare.⁵⁴ The notion of legitimate rulers is important for this theory. The authority of the ruler is not legitimated by divine law or succession lines but from the bottom up, notably by the fact that “the people” have consented to be ruled by this sovereign – be it a single person taking the leadership position or a group of persons who together form a government – because they think that this sovereign will take care of their collective interests. In other words, the subjects subject themselves to the power of the sovereign but they do this consciously; they are not coerced to obey but consent to the authority relation installed between sovereign and subject under the terms of the social contract.

Kathleen Jones gives an interesting analysis of how this theory is permeated with gendered examples, connotations, and presuppositions, which in effect, make the picture of the sovereign gendered in the masculine. This masculinity of the sovereign comes to the fore by the slippages of Hobbes, when he describes the power of the sovereign as the power of the One over the many. Thus Hobbes writes: “A multitude of men are made *one* person, when they are by one man, or one person represented[...] For it is the *unity* of the representer not the *unity* of the represented that maketh the person *one*.”⁵⁵ This preference of the One and of Unity over the many can also be interpreted as a marker of masculine desire in discourse or of the phallic character of this

⁵² This paragraph on the authority of the leader is largely based on Kathleen Jones, who shows that Hobbes describes a state of nature in which the sexes “had the same natural right to claim something as mine.” Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 45.

⁵³ It is noteworthy that although the dominant image of the strong leader is male and masculine, the sovereign is a “position” of and in political leadership. As such, this position can be occupied by men and women alike. Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 46.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 33.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 46 (emphasis in the original).

discourse.⁵⁶ It can also be seen as a consequence of the dominance of the masculine in grammar, ruling that masculine singular pronouns can be used in the generic – thus referring to and representing “the human subject” – or that a group of five women and one man has to be described using plural masculine pronouns.

Although the connection between authority and leadership can be traced back to social contract theories, it becomes more pronounced in Max Weber’s discussion of leadership. Weber distinguishes between traditional, rational, and charismatic leadership. Traditional leadership refers to the kind of leadership that finds its foundation in respect for the tradition and for those who hold this position. Weber thinks of leadership that was inherited by its bearers and accepted by the subjects. One may think of monarchs, for instance, or of children of the founders of family businesses, but also of leaders of religious organisations whose legitimacy is based in the apostolic succession or in the practice of ordination of the religious leader of the local community.

Rational or bureaucratic authority is, according to Weber, grounded in laws and wielded by an administrative structure capable of enforcing clear and consistent rules. It is moreover based on competence and experience and not on inherited positions or family and network relations. It therefore rests “on the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional competence based on rationally created rules.”⁵⁷ This also implies that leadership is not related to personal characteristics, but rather based upon education, experience, and position in the organisation or group (if leadership is approached from the perspective of group dynamics). The shadowy side is that the leadership of the organisation becomes faceless.

According to Moisés Naím, Weber applauded the rationality of the bureaucratic organisation, its specialisation with detailed job descriptions and its hierarchical structure with a clear chain of command. He also argued that “rational, professionalised, hierarchical and centralised structures were ascendant in every domain, from successful political parties to trade unions, ‘ecclesiastical structures’ and great universities.”⁵⁸ The success of bureaucratic

⁵⁶ See Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York 1985), 68-85.

⁵⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society, An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*; quoted in Moisés Naím, *The End of Power. From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn’t What It Used To Be* (Basic Books: New York 2013), 40.

⁵⁸ Naím, *The End of Power*, 41.

organisations lies in their efficiency, predictability, and stability. Procedures ensure equal treatment and control over the unpredictable. But the shadowy side of this kind of organisation is that the kind of knowledge that is deemed necessary for leadership can be described as “technical” and procedural, knowledge which one acquires through experience. This emphasis on technical, rational knowledge – knowledge necessary to ensure a controlled and efficient organisation – constructs all forms other than instrumental knowledge as “irrational”. It also contributes to the identification of authority with “the exertion of power over”, notably over life as it is lived with its irregularities and surprises.⁵⁹ The notion that being an authority has to do with expertise and competence has inspired a movement to professionalise the ordained minister or priest, so that this professional would be more competent in managing the different processes in the religious community and able to offer a (rational) answer to the question “how are we going to do this?”

Although Weber’s argument that bureaucratic leadership would affect every domain of organisation has proved to be prophetic, his ideas about charismatic leadership are now most often referred to. This can be seen as the effect of the dominance of rational leadership and of bureaucratic organisations, since the rigidity of rational leadership gives rise to a yearning for a different kind of leadership, one that can enforce change or transformation. This is why charismatic leadership is also called transformative leadership. Charismatic leadership can be described as “the power or ability to lead and inspire others solely by means of the persuasive force of one’s personality, so without use of coercion or material reward.”⁶⁰ This is a rather toned down version of Weber’s description of “charisma”, which he described as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”⁶¹ Weber describes the charismatic leader thus as someone endowed with characteristics or competences that can be seen as special gifts, gifts from God perhaps?⁶²

⁵⁹ Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 129-130.

⁶⁰ H.P.M. Goddijn et al., *Geschiedenis van de Sociologie* (Boom: Meppel 1980), 178; quoted in Hazeleger, “Wat is leiderschap? Wat is leiderschap in de kerk?” in: Jodien van Ark and Henk de Roest (reds.), *De weg van de Groep. Leidinggeven aan groepen in gemeente en parochie* (Meinema: Zoetermeer 2001), 223-232, here 225 (my translation from the Dutch).

⁶¹ Weber, *Economy and Society* (1978), (I) III, iv, 241; quoted in Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 112.

⁶² The word “charismatic” is derived from the Greek word “charisma” meaning gift of/by grace. In 1 Kor 12: 1-11, Paul makes clear that the members of the Christian community are endowed

This description also illuminates why charismatic leaders are so often associated with heroism, with revolutionary heroes, with prophetic leaders. They think “out of the box,” to use a contemporary expression, and they are moreover able to inspire a movement of change. Their extraordinary powers attract people, who listen to their voice and ideas and get inspired to follow these ideas. Their power lies in the fact that they bring about transformation, or engender the new. This implies that they have to prove themselves time and again as leaders worth following, for instance by doing extraordinary things to ensure the (miraculous) change in the lives of those that follow their directions. Although they do not need force to lead those they inspire, it is not easy for charismatic leaders to ensure the continuation of the movement they lead. In effect, their authority or power over their followers is uncertain, and they may turn into different kind of leaders, those who use coercive power to ensure the realisation of their dreams, when they do not accept that their followers turn to someone else.

Religious Authority and Leadership of a Religious Organisation: Same Difference?

Returning to the question of why “religious authority” is so often interpreted as referring to the leadership of a religious organisation, it may be taken to be the effect of the equation of two modes of “being authority” that dominate the discourse on authority: “being an authority” and “being in authority”.⁶³ These two modes are presented as being almost identical, although they are not. The discursive genealogy of the concept “authority” shows that “being an authority” can refer both to someone who is an authority for someone else through a process of attribution of authority, and to someone who is (considered to be) an authority, because of her or his expertise and experience. These two modes of “being an authority” may go hand in hand, but they are not identical. Thus, someone may freely grant authority to someone because she or he inspires, evokes new ideas, prompts, encourages, or shows hitherto unknown possibilities. This person may be an expert due to professional training, but that is not necessary for the process of granting authority to someone else’s words or acts. Expertise may be a prerequisite for positions of leadership, but it is not a requirement for getting acknowledged as an authority. For granting

with different “charismata”, and that all these different charismata are necessary to build up the community.

⁶³ This distinction is derived from Leslie Green’s lemma on “authority,” in: *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Routledge: London 2000), 68.

authority to someone else is not bound to the rules for the legitimisation of authority positions. It is a far more contextual and flowing, and perhaps “horizontal” process, even though authority relations between persons can be characterised as asymmetrical.

“Being in authority” refers, however, to the legitimisation of the authority. It asks whether someone is “by rights” in the position to command obedience and/or enforce interpretations, or in the position to govern or lead others. The discourse around the claim to such rights shows that these rights are variously established by an appeal to age old traditions of the founding fathers of state or church, to the invocation of rules, such as those of the social contract or of the bureaucratic organisation, or to the possession of gifts of grace, hence to the authority of the charismatic leader.⁶⁴ In everyday discourse, the distinction between “being in authority” and “being an authority” has become blurred, so that someone is thought to “be an authority” because this person is in a leadership position and can command obedience. Calling a leader of an organisation “an authority”, however, only illuminates that this person has the position, with the concomitant rewards and responsibility, to take the final decisions. But once again, this being in authority by right does not necessarily mean that one is also seen and acknowledged as an authority *de facto*, as someone whose words or suggestions are thought to be meaningful and valuable to the ones who do the granting of authority. This necessitates that subjects freely grant authority to the one who is an authority – *de jure*.

As already indicated above, this identification of “being an authority” with “being in authority” has left its traces in the discourse about religious authority and about ordination. The dominant tradition identifies “being an authority” – understood as speaking authoritative words and giving directions to live according to the gospel – with being in the rightful position to speak authoritative words or with giving The one, authoritative interpretation. This equation has had very negative effects on the understanding of “being a religious authority”. It has reduced religious authority to the power of the one who is in leadership position to enforce his or her interpretation of the situation, of the scriptures. Thus, it channelled religious authority in such a way that it became invested in one person or in one tradition at the expense of the voices and interpretations of the many. It has also limited the attribution of being a religious authority by right to the professionals, the experts, and the ordained.

⁶⁴ Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 107.

This interpretation veils the many other relations in which authority is at work, not as an exertion of power over people, but as the transmission of tradition and affording orientation by interpreting tradition in light of the questions of the present – such everyday activities as raising children, coaching, mentoring, teaching, and keeping a network of people – or a faith community – together.

But why is it so important to make the distinction between “being an authority” and “being in authority”? My answer would be that it would make it possible to shift the focus from issues of leadership and the necessary capabilities for leaders of religious organisations, to the practices in everyday life in which authority is at work. In other words, it would enable a shift from authority *de jure* to authority *de facto*, and therefore to practices such as mentioned above in order to look for that that is meaningful and valuable in the words and gestures of the one who is granted authority in these everyday practices. This would imply that it would no longer be the prerogative of the one in authority to speak authoritative words, but that this would be determined by the many different practices of attribution of authority. It would also open up the floor for the authoritative words of those speaking from different locations in life and from different experiences about what might be understood as the word of God.

Attention to these practices may shed a new light upon what listeners and followers experience as words that “inspire, evoke new ideas, prompt, encourage and shows hitherto unknown possibilities.”⁶⁵ In other words, it may shed light on which words and practices are understood to be authoritative about the good life *coram Deo* or experienced to be oriented towards growth, to be life giving, experienced as words that can be trusted and believed in, and hence, as authoritative words of God.

Why is the term “religious authority” often understood as “the leadership of a religious organisation” and not as imparting the authoritative words of God? This is the question explored in this paper. The author first identifies the sources that brought about her understanding of authority as a relational and dynamic concept, having to do with imparting words which inspire the other to grow, to realise what she or he may be capable of being. She then explains that this interpretation of authority comes close to an understanding of religious authority when connected with Luce Irigaray’s notion of a divine horizon offering orientation for this process of growth. A religious authority would thus be someone imparting orientation through words valued as authoritative. This interpretation differs from the dominant interpretation of both

⁶⁵ Knecht et al., *ABC*, 25.

(a) authority as the power to command or enforce one's views, and (b) religious authority as referring to the leadership of religious organisations. Based on Hannah Arendt's text "What is authority?" and several other sources, the author traces the origin of this understanding of religious authority from the classical period to modernity. She concludes that the understanding of religious authority as the leadership of a religious organisation is the effect of equating "being in authority" with "being an authority". Whereas the former refers to the legitimation of authority and therefore the legitimation of the power to command, the latter presents authority as a relational and dynamic process that is not affixed to a position, but located in everyday life. Authority is freely granted to someone imparting orientation through words that can be trusted and believed in because they are life giving.

Warum wird der Begriff „religiöse Autorität“ oft als „Leitung einer religiösen Institution“ verstanden, nicht als autoritatives Sprechen göttlicher Worte? Dieser Frage wird in diesem Artikel nachgegangen. Dabei werden zunächst die Quellen identifiziert, die die Autorin dazu geführt haben, Autorität als ein relationales und dynamisches Konzept zu verstehen, das andere dazu inspiriert, die eigenen Potentiale wahrzunehmen und mit ihnen zu wachsen. Es wird gezeigt, dass diese Interpretation von Autorität im Dialog mit Luce Irigaray's Begriff eines göttlichen Horizontes religiöse Autorität als einen Begriff erklärt, der Orientierungen für diesen Wachstumsprozess bietet. Eine religiöse Autorität ist, so verstanden, jemand, der oder die in Worten eine Orientierung vorgibt, die als autoritativ gewertet werden kann. Diese Verstehensweise unterscheidet sich von der vorherrschenden Interpretation, Autorität als eine Macht zu verstehen, die befiehlt oder die eigenen Sichtweisen durchsetzt, und Autorität als Leitung religiöser Organisationen versteht. Hannah Arendt's Text „Was ist Autorität?“ nutzend, zeigt die Autorin die historische Entwicklung dieses Autoritätsverständnisses von der Aufklärung bis in die Moderne. Daraus zieht sie den Schluss, dass religiöse Autorität, verstanden als Leitung einer religiösen Organisation, das Resultat einer Gleichsetzung ist. „Eine Position inne haben, die qua Amt Autorität hat“ ist identisch mit „eine Autorität sein“ ist. Während die erste Interpretation sich auf die Legitimierung von Autorität und Befehlsgewalt bezieht, stellt die zweite Autorität einen relationalen und dynamischen Prozess dar, der nicht an eine Position gebunden ist. Er ist im Alltag verortet. Autorität wird hier in aller Freiheit einer Person zugesprochen, die mit Worten sagt, in was vertraut werden kann, Worte, die geglaubt werden können, weil sie Leben ermöglichen.

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