

David Hay

‘In the hands of my Superior, I must be a soft wax, a thing, from which he is to require whatever pleases him, be it to write or receive letters, to speak or not to speak to such a person or the like; and I must put all my fervour in executing zealously and exactly what I am ordered. I must consider myself as a corpse which has neither intelligence nor will; be like a mass of matter which without resistance lets itself be placed wherever it may please anyone; like a stick in the hands of an old man, who uses it according to his needs and places it where it suits him.’

St Ignatius’s¹ ideals about the nature of authority were derived from sixteenth-century Spanish culture and although perhaps not quite so drastically expressed today, his view of the Superior/Subordinate relationship still constitutes a central element in the thought pattern of many participants in the modern debate in the Church. This dialogue should be of interest to social psychologists, because it illustrates one of the recurring themes of that discipline, the forms of authority and people’s perception of them.

Research on authoritarianism

Before the war, Kurt Lewin and his associates Ronald Lippitt and Ralph White² tried to compare the effects of three kinds of adult leadership on the behaviour of a group of American boys. The setting for the experiment was a number of small ‘clubs’, ostensibly set up to carry out a variety of craft and recreational activities, and the adult leaders of the clubs were described as Authoritarian, Democratic and *Laissez-faire*. In the authoritarian group, all policy was determined by the leader, whilst in the democratic situation all policies were a matter for group discussion and decision, encouraged and assisted by the leader. We can omit the *laissez-faire* group.

When the autocratic and democratic groups were compared on a number of variables, clear-cut differences were demonstrated. Under autocratic leadership the boys appeared to be frustrated and this was resolved by aggressive acts of one kind or another; they were apathetic and lacked personal involvement in the work of their group, and control and task orientation disappeared when the autocratic leader was not present. However, in the democratic situation the behaviour was quite different: the children were responsive and spontaneous,

¹Quoted by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, from the biography of St Ignatius by Bartoli-Michel, Vol. 2, p. 13.

²See R. K. White (1960)—*Autocracy and Democracy*. N.Y., Harper Bros.

they did not need the supervision of the leader to keep working and they showed less evidence of aggression and hostility.

This study is frequently cited as evidence that democratic leadership produces more enthusiasm and more socially adaptable behaviour than does autocratic leadership. However, the situation turns out to be rather more complex. For one thing, it has been found difficult to repeat these results consistently, and a recent study demonstrates a reversal of the pattern. R. D. Meade¹ did a comparable experiment with groups of Hindu boys living in Northern India. On measures of absenteeism, the wish to continue with activities, expressed preference to continue under one particular leader, productivity, quality of work and morale, the groups with authoritarian leadership were superior to the ones with democratic leadership.

The reason for these conflicting results could conceivably be that the measuring techniques were sufficiently crude to permit unwitting distortions by the experimenters, but there is another more plausible explanation which relates to the origin of Meade's work. In a previous study, Meade and Whittaker² had attempted to measure authoritarianism in six culturally disparate groups of college students: Americans, Brazilians, Arabs, Chinese, Rhodesians and Indians. The least authoritarian were the Americans and the most authoritarian were the Indians, a not unlikely result when one considers on the one hand the strongly egalitarian strain running through American political ideology and on the other hand the history of rigid social division produced by the Hindu caste system. Thus it may be that cultural expectation partly determines whether authoritarian or democratic leadership is found more acceptable, and perhaps might determine the extent to which different national groups are inclined to accept with docility the directives of an authority source. Whilst the above suggestion is speculative, there is a great deal of evidence to convince one that within any one cultural group there are wide variations in personality type, so that some people are much more strongly predisposed than others to accept eagerly the injunctions of some higher authority, irrespective of the extent to which such injunctions are wise or misguided.

The origin of the measure of authoritarianism which was used by Meade and Whittaker is to be found in a series of studies reported in *The Authoritarian Personality*.³ This book has proved to be something of a landmark in the development of social psychology and it continues to generate a considerable volume of criticism, comment and further research. Several of the criticisms appear to be justified, but the major conclusions of the work remain largely unchallenged.

In essence, the authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* were trying to establish the characteristics of people prejudiced against Jews. It

¹*Journal of Social Psychology* 72 (1967), pp. 35-43.

²*Journal of Social Psychology* 72 (1967), pp. 3-7.

³T. W. Adorno *et al.* (1950). *The Authoritarian Personality*. N.Y., Harper.

soon became clear that there was a tendency for anti-Semites to be prejudiced against all other minority groups and a somewhat weaker tendency for them to hold conservative political and economic views. Having established criterion groups of anti-semitic and unprejudiced people by means of 'paper-and-pencil' questionnaires, the experimenters then attempted to discover the range of personality characteristics associated with prejudiced, rather than unprejudiced subjects. On the basis of clinical interviews, they came to the conclusion that there were at least nine aspects of personality which were particularly associated with prejudice, and by selecting from the records of their interviews they were able to construct a set of thirty statements giving verbal expression to these nine attitude areas, and use it as an attitude scale. People who strongly agreed with a large number of items on this scale were likely, in the opinion of the authors, to be racially prejudiced, and as it turned out, authoritarian. The nine characteristic areas are as follows:

- (a) *Conventionalism*: A rigid adherence to conventional middle-class values.
- (b) *Authoritarian submission*: A submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the in-group.
- (c) *Authoritarian aggression*: A tendency to be on the look-out for, and to condemn, reject and punish people who violate conventional values.
- (d) *Anti-intraception*: An opposition to the subjective, the imaginative and the tender-minded.
- (e) *Superstition and stereotypy*: The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate, the disposition to think in rigid categories.
- (f) *Power and toughness*: A preoccupation with the dominance/submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; over-emphasis on the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.
- (g) *Destructiveness and cynicism*: A generalized hostility; vilification of the human.
- (h) *Projectivity*: The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.
- (i) *Sex*: Exaggerated concern with sexual 'goings-on'.

The whole scale is referred to as the F (Fascism) Scale, because high scorers are thought to be susceptible to Fascist propaganda. Adorno and his co-workers used Freudian theory as the framework for their explanation of the genesis of the 'High-F' personality, and indeed from their studies of the childhood of their high-scoring subjects, they were able to show that the conditions for the development of strong psychological defence mechanisms were usually present. Prejudiced people tended to report a relatively harsh and threatening type of home discipline during childhood and they

experienced this as arbitrary rather than reasonable. Their parents appeared to base inter-relationships on clearly defined roles of dominance and submission rather than on a more equalitarian approach and consequently the child's image of his parents seemed to acquire a forbidding, or at least a distant quality. There was a fearful subservience to the demands of the parents and an early suppression of impulses not acceptable to them.

Because the child does not understand the values of the parents and yet these are vigorously imposed on him, conduct not in conformity with the required behavioural façade has to be 'split off' from the rest of the personality or, in Freudian terms, rendered ego-alien. These suppressed but unmodified impulses find one of their outlets in the area of social and political attitudes, where they can emerge with great intensity. In particular, indignation at first experienced in relation to the parents is redirected against outgroups and socially deviant individuals.

Furthermore, the tendency mentioned of absorbing a transmitted but unexplained set of conventional rules and customs seems to interfere with the development of a clear-cut personal identity in the child. Instead there is a surface conformity, expressing itself in a stereotyped approach in almost all areas of life and an absence of any genuine emotional warmth. Even in the intellectual area, ready-made clichés are given preference to spontaneous reactions. To summarize, the faithful execution of prescribed roles is often given preference to the free-flowing exchange of ideas and affection, so that psychological primacy may be given to membership of an institution rather than to relationships with other human beings.

The comparison of different social groups with respect to their F-scores has proved to be perennially attractive to research students, particularly in the United States, and although there is not complete consensus, the general finding is that religious people score more highly than non-religious people, and that Catholics score more highly than any other religious group.

Catholics and authoritarianism

There are various possible reasons for the high scores of Catholics. American Catholics tend to come from the less privileged sectors of their society and it has been demonstrated that high scores on the F-scale are often associated with lack of education. However, when groups are matched for social class the difference apparently remains. It may be the case, in Western societies at any rate, that Catholic child-rearing practices are somewhat stricter than those of surrounding populations. Dr Elizabeth Newson informs me that there is some slight evidence of this in her studies, but more extensive information on the point is likely to be accumulated at the seven-year stage.¹ Certainly reluctance to do away with corporal punish-

¹Personal communication; see John and Elizabeth Newson, *Four Years Old in an Urban Community*. London, Allen and Unwin, 1968, reviewed by Sister Dorothy Berridge in *New Blackfriars*, October 1968.

ment appears to have been a feature of our schools and there is at least one report that Catholics are more extrapunitive than are members of other religious groups,¹ that is to say, they are prone to project blame on to other people. No doubt membership of a rigidly hierarchical institution is likely to predispose a person to accept the voice of authority, whatever his individual personality characteristics, but there is a persistent tradition of anti-semitism and over-concern with sex which can be traced back to the early stages of Church history. Theo Westow² has recently documented the fact that several of the most influential of the Early Fathers appear to have been preoccupied to a quite bizarre extent with the iniquities of sexual relationships, and the presumed crimes of the Jews.

Within the contemporary Church then, for one reason or another, a relatively high proportion of people seem prepared to accept the dictates of authority and indeed would prefer to be given an authoritative lead on unresolved questions of conduct, rather than be involved in a more democratic decision-making procedure. On the other hand, whilst Catholics as a group seem to be more authoritarian than other people, the range of scores is as wide as is to be found elsewhere³. That is to say, whilst they are not as numerous as in other groups, there is a proportion of Catholics who have low or intermediate scores on the F-scale.

At this point it must be made clear that I am not suggesting that obedience to a papal ruling is due to a personality quirk, only that some people obey for reasons other than simple intellectual conviction. To such people, dissent will appear treasonable because their attachment to the social structure replaces a truly human attachment⁴ and hence criticism of that structure is taken to be an attack on the roots of the Faith. They will feel motivated to silence or expel the expressers of such opinions, and this in turn can lead to destructive argument rather than creative discussion in the Church, as Karl Rahner has foreseen in a recent article:⁵

'We must get used to dissonances in the Church. We must learn to understand that tensions need not cancel out the unity of faith, the will to obedience or indeed, love. Both sides must get used to that: the officials who must not think that silent assent is a duty of Christian citizens, and the laity who must not think that the fundamental possibility of theological differences of opinion and of particular refusals of obedience entitles them to arbitrary theological thinking and revolutionary obnoxiousness.'

(To be completed next month)

¹L. B. Brown (1965), *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 4, 175-178.

²In *Authority in a Changing Church*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1968.

³See, Rokeach, M. (1960). *The Open and Closed Mind*. New York, Basic Books.

⁴In this regard the passage from the *Summa* of St Thomas Aquinas quoted by Father Timothy McDermott, O.P., on page 321 of this same issue is very suggestive.

⁵'Demokratie in der Kirche?' *Stimmen Der Zeit*, July 1968, pp. 1-15.