THE CHRISTIAN GOD AND HUMAN AUTHORITY
A THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY WITH REFERENCE TO
AFRICA’S PRINCIPAL WORLD-VIEWS

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1. The African Crisis of Traditional and Modern Authorities

From all sides we hear that the authorities in sub-Saharan Africa are involved in a deep crisis. Traditional authorities are rapidly losing influence; while at the same time newly imported forms of authority oscillate between powerlessness and power-abuse. Despite international pressure towards democratisation, governments exercise their power along authoritarian and sometimes dictatorial patterns. In order to gain the international respectability they need, they tend to accept democracy, but only in as far as they are forced, as little as possible and without any real conviction. Yet, their authoritarian behaviour is only equalled by their inability to influence what is going on in their vast territories, which lack adequate governmental structures. In the experience of many, nothing is functioning as it used to; yet, no clear or stable alternative is emerging.

The churches are working hard to offer a positive contribution and to address the questions their governments are facing. Yet, with regards to their own structures of authority the churches as much of the crisis as the other authorities, both in the lack and the abuse of authority.1

Complaints about the lack and abuse of authority are of course ageless, but the political and ecclesiastical realities of contemporary Africa justify speaking of a genuine crisis. In this situation it is natural to search for healthy examples. Africans can look with nostalgia to their pre-colonial past, in which human relationships were so much clearer. Africans south of the Sahara can look to the North, where Muslim governments and societies appear more stable. If we did not see this ourselves, Muslim propaganda will tell those not yet in their sphere of influence about the goodness of Islamic law. The West of course remains a major attraction for Africans both for its affluence and

its peace. If Africans themselves are not attracted to the western way of
organising society, the West will impose itself both through western
controlled international organisations and through its media and economic
power. Along with these three major spheres of influence in contemporary
Africa of tradition, Islam and (post)modernity, Christianity is a major force
with its deep roots in Africa’s past and its vibrant recent history.

Christians have a unique understanding of authority, grounded in their
unique understanding of God as they have met Him in Jesus Christ. The thesis
of this article is that starting from their knowledge of God Christians have a
unique and healthy contribution to make to the African crisis of authority. As
a Christian serving for some time on this continent and participating in its
life, I want to contribute my part. This basic idea, that a Christian understand-
ing and practice of authority follows from a Christian understanding of God,

from at least three ways.

First of all, this relationship is fundamental to biblical theology. The two
Testaments consider the imitation of God and Jesus Christ a central criterion
for knowing how to live according to the will of God and is a decisive
motivation to live accordingly (Lev 19:2-4; Mk 19:43-45; John 15:12; Eph
5:1). In the same way, the Scriptures consider the “renewal of our minds”
a key to the renewal of our lives and communities. Only if we start viewing
things in the right way, in the light of God’s character, purpose and
redemptive actions, will we be able to discover the will of God for our lives
and communities and to live accordingly (Rom 12:2; Ph 1:9s).

From the perspective of cultural anthropology, research has revealed a
close relationship between the morality of a particular culture and its world-
view. We will see that this relationship is not unique to Christianity, but
how the world-views and theologies of African Traditional Religion, Islam
and (post)modernity equally correspond to their respective understanding and
practice of authority.

From the perspective of systematic analysis, the relationship between
authority and world-view is seen from both ends of the relationship. A world-
view as a comprehensive perspective on reality encompasses basic beliefs

2 Despite major differences between modernity and postmodernity, in this paper I discuss
them together, because in comparison to the other world-views discussed in this paper
they clearly stem from the same root, as is shown particularly in their conceptions of
authority. “Postmodernism retains a number of elements that characterized modernism:
[...] It repudiates all external, objective, transcendent authority” (Carl F.H. Henry,
‘Postmodernism: The New Spectre?’, in: David S. Dockrey (ed.), The Challenge of

3 Stanley J. Grenz, A Primer on Postmodernism, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, 100 &
114-117; Walter C. Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

4 Clifford Geertz, “Ethos, World View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols”, in: idem,