
Nominalist and Realist Approaches to the Problem of Authority: Pálež and Hus

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The concept of authority¹ played one of the most significant rôles in attempts to find the way out of the late mediæval crisis of the Church. What was to be taken as authoritative, i.e. as normative for the life of a Christian? In Hus' generation, this question had strong practical connotations. In 1302, obedience to the pope was proclaimed as necessary for salvation;² in 1378 two popes were elected: Urban VI in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon. The two were at war and each anathematised the other as well as the other's followers. In order to find a solution, the Synod of Pisa (1409) suspended both popes and elected another: Alexander V. Neither of the existing popes resigned, so that there were three popes each demanding obedience and taxes.³ The schism, which lasted forty years, led Christians into wars and bitter polemic.

The concept of authority needed reflection and a new definition. The old definitions proved untenable in the light of the current ecclesiastical situation in which there were three popes each claiming to be the exclusive representative of the one God.⁴ The schism created the image of three mutually exclusive universes. If there were three popes each at war with the others then could there be three Gods also at war with each other and three Christs each of whom was faithfully represented by his own Vicar? Were there then also three Holy Spirits?⁵ The church as a whole did not think so and, thus, had to address the questions: how is it possible that the highest

1) The word "authority" ("exousia" in Greek) denotes in the New Testament the ability to perform an action, the right to do something, or the right over something where authority and power are not always separated. However, as Foerster emphasizes, it can also be used in antithesis to law in the sense of self-asserted freedom. Werner Foerster, "exousia", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* ed. Gerhard Kittell (Grand Rapids, 1964) 2:563. Thus the derivative meanings such as "authoritative position", "office-bearers", or "rulers", must be balanced with the "freedom to act".

2) Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*.

3) See August Franzen, *A Concise History of the Church* (New York, 1969) 233f.

4) John Wyclif (1329–1384) represented the second wave of anti-nominalist reaction against Ockham and Scotus and their scepticism of employing any concept of a direct transcendent authority of God in the life of the Christian.

5) In his *Contra Stephanum Palecz* Hus writes suggesting there can be but one Christ and one pope: Quomodo ergo stat in veritae ista fitoris similitudo: "Sicut cunctis fidelibus non plures Cristi, sed unus est Kristus, sic eiusdem non plures vicarii immediati Iesu Cristi, sed unus est – papa"? *Magistri Ioannis Hus Polemica* Jaroslav Eršil ed. [Magistri Iohannis Hus Opera omnia XXII] (Prague, 1966) 257.

ecclesiastical authority can fall into corruption? and how can the faithful be prevented from being misled by a corrupt and, therefore, false authority?

In this paper I do not intend to deal with this problem from an historical perspective but, rather, from an epistemological one. I will attempt to demonstrate that answering the question of what is normative for the Christian life depends on *underpinning religious epistemologies*. In other words, it depends on *how we believe God communicates with us*.

In his *Tradition and Traditions*, Yves Congar describes a tension that exists between the search for a right subordination and the search for criteria for a Christian orthodoxy and orthopractice⁶ both of which are ascribed to a notion of authority:

Opinion oscillated between the preferred idea of *objective* rules, and that of the *Church* as rule. St. Thomas restricted the title of *regula*, understood in an absolute sense, to the *doctrina* of God revealed through the prophets and apostles; Ockham was concerned to subordinate “the Church” strictly to the objective sources of its faith. But it was not possible without ignoring the whole of Catholic tradition, to refuse the Church a certain quality of rule of faith; all the more so because, in the Middle Ages, there could not be thought of questioning the normative and obligatory character of the conclusions endorsed by the Church. However, what must be understood by the word “Church”? The pope? The council? Gerson thought so. The doctors taken as a whole? On all these points there was still no clearly worked out doctrine, still no agreement among theologians.⁷

Authoritative divine communication, according to Congar, was attributed to both the sources of the church (Christ, as portrayed by Scripture and Tradition) and the structure of the church (the pope, the council and their pronouncements). Thus, the concept of authority was employed in two different ways: the first involves “authority” in the singular and is understood in terms of the function of subordination which was said to have its origins in Christ, i.e. Christ’s subordination to the Father.⁸ Authorities, in the plural, were understood as criteria for ordering Christian life and belief (Scripture, Tradition, the Church, reason, conscience etc.). The religious epistemology behind both these ways of understanding authority, as Congar

6) Although the term “orthopractice” is a recent one, it will be used in this context as the antonym of heresy which, according to Hus, is as much a matter of morals as it is of doctrine. *De sex erroribus* ed. Bohumil Ryba, *Betlemské Texty* (Prague, 1951) 41–63 and Hus’s own Czech translation *O šesti bludiech*, *ibid.* 65–103 and *Mistr Jan Hus: Drobné spisy české / Opera Bohemica minora* Jiří Daňhelka ed. [Magistri Iohannis Hus Opera omnia IV] (Prague, 1985) 271–296.

7) Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: an historical and a theological essay*, trans. Michael Naseby (London and New York, 1966) 96.

8) See Mk 2:10; Jn 17:1–5.

emphasises, is related to “exaggerated developments in the importance attached to the ecclesiastical element”.⁹

The concept of authority, then, whether singular or plural, was expressed within the controversy between two competing religious epistemologies: the nominalist and the realist. Both aimed at giving grounds for answering two pressing questions: first, what impedes the church from imaging a Christ-like discipleship? and, second, how can a Christ-centred order be rediscovered within the church and, through it, a way out of the crisis?

The nominalist position was held by Jean Gerson and Pierre d’Ailly, two of the principle proponents of the Council,¹⁰ and by Stanislav of Znojmo and Štěpán Pálec (former teachers and colleagues of Hus¹¹) on the Bohemian scene. As Jaroslav Hrdlička has pointed out, mediæval nominalism had both its extreme and moderate forms:

Extreme nominalism is concentrated on the realm of things. It emphasised their singularity ... universal concepts are thus created by reason as empty names. Moderate, conceptual, nominalism claimed that the universal concepts are not simply empty names in as much as we experience a connection between individual things in our minds.¹²

It was this moderate position that was held by Czech nominalists. In his *De universalibus* Stanislav claimed that “universal concepts are only common names we use to describe things similar to each other”.¹³

How was the problem of the universal concept related to our search for a legitimate authority? The concern with individual things gave a good basis for understanding the concept of authority in its plural form: as individual things which built up the structure of the church. Divine authority was seen as mediated exclusively through the church. In other words, the church was defining rules for the mediation of divine authority, be it through pope or council.

Moderate nominalism represented a progressive stream in the church. It demanded a certain decentralization of ecclesiastical power in which power was to be transferred from an individual (the pope) to a corporate body (the council).¹⁴ The

9) Congar, *Tradition and Traditions* 96.

10) The late mediæval church was divided in opinion over whether a council was superior to the pope (conciliarism) or the pope to a council (papalism). Nominalists usually advocated the conciliarist position while realists were generally papalists.

11) See Václav Novotný, *M. Jan Hus, život a učení* [Master Jan Hus, Life and Teachings] (Prague, 1919) 1:110–113.

12) Jaroslav Hrdlička, “Hus a Pálec”, *Jan Hus mezi epochami národy a konfesemi* [Jan Hus between Epochs, Nations and Confessions], ed. Jan Blahoslav Lášek (Prague, 1995) 81.

13) Jan Sedlák, *M. Jan Hus* (Prague, 1915) 79–80.

14) As Pálec’s claim “quod Papa est caput Ecclesiæ Romanæ, Collegium vero Cardinalium corpus” (*Contra Palecz*, Opera 1558 1:259^a) we can see that his attempts to support conciliarism involved high value for the papacy regardless of its crises. Pálec’s statement also demonstrates the

price paid for this openness, however, was in terms of an absolute obedience to the council which now became the mediator of divine authority. Therefore:

It is a pragmatic feature of the nominalist thought of Pálež's time that created a foundation for a fundamental scepticism which made it possible to accept any dogmatic statement on the basis of authority i.e. subordination to the ecclesiastical power.¹⁵

The religious epistemology underlying moderate nominalism was, thus, founded on the assumptions that:

1) There is no direct communication between an individual and God.

2) In the present life, the church stands in the place of God and mediates the divine authority. As such, obedience to God is equated with obedience to the church.

3) The highest representative of divine authority is the council which, alone, has supreme power even over the election or deposition of a pope. This means that the highest authority of the church is a matter of order and discipline and not of moral credibility or of the quality of relationship with God.¹⁶

4) If the matter of order and discipline is treated as the highest and sole criterion for the right subordination to Christ, it can, indeed, be fully mediated by the church. There is no transcendent possibility of error in the church's decisions for they have, in fact, no transcendent point of reference.

The realist position represented by Hus¹⁷ is as moderate as was Pálež's nominalism.

Extreme realism, was concerned with the world of ideas. Universal concepts exist independently from our reason ... Moderate realism was based on the position that the world is a single universe built up by individual things. Universal concepts arise from capturing characteristics common to a large number of existent like beings. They are the characteristics of specific existing beings and have their true existence only through the individual objects.¹⁸

contemporary equation of the church with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, creating an ecclesiology which leaves the laity devoid of any significant rôle.

15) Hrdlička, "Hus a Pálež", 82.

16) According to Pálež, it is imperative for a pope to be legally elected: "Staret enim quod ascenderet per ritam et legitimum electionem vocatus." *Contra Palecz*, Opera 1558 1:259^a.

17) While Hus followed the realism of Wyclif, he never subscribed to Wyclif's most radical positions and was, in fact, critical of them. It is interesting to note that during his studies Stanislav of Znojmo, as well as Štěpán Pálež, adhered to a much more radical Wyclifite position. See Novotný, *M. Jan Hus* 110–113.

18) Hrdlička, "Hus a Pálež", 81.

The critical point for the realist position, nevertheless, both in philosophy and theology, was the problem of [point of??] reference: How do individual things refer to what is constitutive of their being? When translated into the debate concerning authority the question became: How can particular Christian authorities (including both council and pope) successfully refer to God and to divine authority?

The religious epistemology underlying Hus's moderate realism can be summarized thus:

1) Successful mediation of divine authority is dependent on the faith and morals of the one who is appointed to hold ecclesiastical office. The centre of his life must be Christ, otherwise he substitutes his own authority for that of Christ.¹⁹

2) The church's authority does not stand in isolation from other authorities, i.e. Scripture, Tradition and conscience. There is a relationship of mutual dependence between all three.²⁰

3) Moderate realist epistemology advocates a mixture of direct and mediated ways of divine communication.

4) In a crisis situation, a direct appeal to divine authority is superior to the mediated one.²¹

5) Neither way is free from possible error. In other words, we can be wrong in what we consider to be a right subordination to Christ either on the grounds of obeying the mediating authority of the church or on the grounds of evaluating the call of one's conscience. Therefore, the transcendent divine authority can never be fully identified with our present human understanding of it. This means that an eschatological evaluation of our subordination to Christ might be quite different from those made by worldly authorities.

As we can see, the two religious epistemologies were incompatible with each other. This gave ground to a profound misunderstanding at the Council of Constance. The adherents of nominalism expected Hus to subject himself to the authority of the

19) In his *Responsiones ad articulos Palecz*, Hus, arguing from biblical and patristic witnesses suggests that those in authority who enjoin acts forbidden by the will of God or the Scriptures are guilty of sacrilege. "Is, qui preest, si praeter voluntatem Dei vel praeter quod in scripturis sanctis evidenter praecipitur, vel dicit aliquid, vel imperat tamquam falsus Dei testis vel sacrilegus habetur." Höfler 1:231.

20) The mutual interdependence of particular Christian authorities in Hus meets in the cornerstone of Hus's theology: the notion of truth. See Ivana Dolejšová, "Hus a Pálec: Realismus versus nominalismus", *Jan Hus mezi epochami národy a konfesemi* 84–85.

21) In 1412, when Hus was silenced by the ecclesiastical authorities and had to leave Prague, he made his final appeal directly to Christ saying: "I, Jan Hus of Husinec ... make this appeal to Jesus Christ, the most just Judge, who knows, protects and judges, declares and rewards without fail the just cause of every man." *Sermon: "Quia deus omnipotens"* [18 October 1412], Novotný, *Korespondence* No. 46. 133. English translation in Matthew Spinka, *John Hus at the Council of Constance* (New York, 1965) 240.

Council so as not to disturb the process of the renewal of the church by reestablishing a strict and centralized order that would not allow for excesses.²² If Hus were to be allowed to be an exception, then anyone could claim that, in disobeying the council, s/he was obeying Christ directly – including the deposed popes! Thus, the fear that direct appeals to the authority of Christ would lead to even greater chaos led to the imposition of violence in order to secure ecclesiastical unity.²³

Hus's understanding of the supreme and immediate authority of Christ, however, had an eschatological dimension which his nominalist opponents were not capable of appreciating. We can see this in his final appeal to Christ: "I, Jan Hus of Husinec ... make this appeal to Jesus Christ, the most just Judge, who knows, protects and judges, declares and rewards without fail the just cause of every man."²⁴ Hus's expression of authority as a direct submission to Christ did not take away the importance of authorities as criteria for Christian belief and life. This was not taken into account by Pálež, Stanislav of Znojmo, Gerson or d'Ailly. When Hus called for a public defence at the Council²⁵ he demonstrated that he accepted its authority, and that he was also capable of relating himself to the authority of Scripture and Tradition and the place of human Conscience and that all these factors were taken into account when he placed himself under Christ's judgement. Nominalism, on the other hand, did not allow for a combination of both the transcendent and immanent authorities and was incapable of seeing the common Christ-centred ground for a dynamic relationship between particular realities i.e. the Church, Scripture, Tradition and Conscience.

We can, thus, conclude that Hus's accusation of heresy was deeply rooted in late mediæval nominalist religious epistemology whose criteria for orthodoxy were defined in terms of obedience: one either obeyed the Council or one did not.

If Hus's case is to be reevaluated today, we must bear in mind that we are thereby reevaluating the concepts of authority, obedience and, indeed, religious epistemology in which we must treat either Christ or the church's hierarchy as the final arbiter.

22) E.g. the papal schism as mentioned above. For, as Henry Chadwick and G.R. Evans put it, even Luther called for a centralized order based on Scripture in reacting against Andreas Carlstadt and Thomas Münzer's dependence on a direct revelation of the Spirit. *Atlas of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1989) 95.

23) This was something that Pálež, himself, experienced in his encounter with the inquisition and which led to his conversion from realism to nominalism.

24) Spinka, *John Hus at the Council of Constance* 240.

25) See Amedeo Molnár, *Mistr Jan Hus: Řeč o míru – Sermo de Pace* (Prague, 1963) 15–16.