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Preface

"Authority" is one of those words. You can abuse it by casual use, assuming wrongly that everyone knows what it means. You can also overload it with metaphysical baggage and color it with emotional resentment, since most of us detest authority insofar as it impinges on our wishes and whims, which it usually does. Even worse is the academic habit of taking authority to be an "it," an objectified notion that is definable, say, in a Weberian cosmology or, if not Weber's, then someone else's. I can honestly say that I don't know what authority is and often have trouble recognizing it where others see it, and if I had to translate it into Sanskrit or Telugu or Malayalam, I might not be able to come up with anything remotely like a commensurate term.

Hence – given this cloud of unknowing, which I assume I share with most of us – this volume. All the papers have intentionally taken on a meditative format. They are not necessarily your standard academic essays, with appropriate footnotes, though some of the papers do follow these conventions to powerful effect. The authors, most of them post-doctoral Fellows in the Martin Buber Society of Fellows at the Hebrew University, together with colleagues of ours from the Hebrew University and from the Zukunftskolleg at the University of Konstanz, themselves invented this playful format as we approached the conference on authority at the end of the first year of the Society's existence. The topic itself emerged from an after-dinner discussion and seemed at once to be broad enough and interesting enough to embrace all the disciplines and orientations present around the table. As such, it provides the rudiments of a paradigm for the

series of publications that begins with this book and that will, we hope, be the visiting card of the MBSF, or one of them.

If we don't know what authority is, why do we hate it so passionately? Is it because the idea of an authored norm, heavy with formal conventions, naturally tends to brittle objectification, probably the prime enemy of anything alive? There is a story told about the well-known scholar of religion, in particular of Islam, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Once, after a lecture on the notion of scripture, someone asked him: "Is the Qur'an a scripture for you?" He answered: "It was, once in my life." He was on a boat somewhere in the Arabian Sea, far from his family, worried about some family matter; suddenly he "heard" in his mind the Qur'anic verse, "My mercy is more than enough for you." That put his heart at ease. At that moment, the text was scripture – authoritative, we could say, in a living way. But as I tell this story, which I heard from my friend Charles Hallisey, already I feel that I have inflicted some harm on it; that I have, in fact, made it into something authoritative in the most negative sense of the word. Now the story has become scripture, and thus an object of rebellion and distaste. I'm already sorry that I told it here.

Listen to the voice of Annamayya, a fifteenth-century Telugu poet at the great temple of Tirupati in south India. He is speaking in a slightly indirect fashion to the temple god, Lord Venkatesvara:

> What can I say about my crazy ways?
> Just laugh them off.
> Take care of me.
>
> You speak through me,
> and I'm proud of my eloquence.
> You control the whole world,
> but I think I'm the king.
>
> *What can I say?*

You create all these people,
and then I think *I'm* my children's father.
You give whatever I have,
But I'm sure I've earned it all.

What can I say?

You give this world and the other,
and I think I've won them by my prayers.
You're not finished with me yet.
I'm the great expert
on God.

What can I say?[1]

Here is a statement on authority we could live with: ironic, playful, self-deprecating, subversive. It comes to us in what is called a *padam*, a short 3-verse poem, with a refrain, that encapsulates a single, non-repeatable moment, as befits the kind of authority made present in it. The poet acknowledges the god as the true source of all that he says, does, and knows; yet the ironic conclusion to the poem – the claim to have expertise that applies to the god he has been addressing – is not entirely unfounded. "You're not finished with me yet" – the poet comes close to making a threat. Annamayya does know about this god, in an internal or intuitive way that may well surpass the god's own self-knowledge. Authority, here, is thus somehow mutually fashioned or negotiated, not in any sense a given *a priori*, whatever the niceties of ontic priority may be.

Can there exist something like a non-arbitrary authority – some form of organic and integral and relatively autonomous expression of what is true, or what is real? I tend to doubt it, although all of us have had what could be called "truth experiences," as if we know truth when we encounter it. Some incontrovertible authority surely resides

1 Translated by Velcheru Narayana Rao and David Shulman, *God on the Hill: Temple Poems from Tirupati*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

in, say, the fragrance of the pine tree or the taste of fresh bread. However, there is always the problem of designation. Kafka says, "We were created to live in Paradise, and Paradise was designed to serve us. Our designation has been changed; we are not told whether this happened to Paradise as well" (*Zuerau Aphorisms* 84). Who had the authority to change our designation? I think this is an intractable problem, worthy, however, of meditation. As to changing the designation of Paradise – is not the implication of Kafka's dictum that we do this routinely, thereby abusing our own innate authority?

What would innate authority feel like? One part of myself may ally itself with conscience, or with a commitment to truth, or with an overriding need or goal, against other, more slippery parts. Presumably, a battle is going on much of the time. The balance at any given moment is uncertain. Probably, in the last analysis, we rely – as an indication of truth – only on what we have experienced ourselves or, as Vico said, have *made* ourselves; only the latter are capable of being understood. Inner authority of this kind may be a physical, concrete matter, something one knows from bodily pain or delight. Against such authoritative knowledge there will also, no doubt, be a temptation to rebel, as there normally is on the level of collective structures of authority. Indeed, we should be grateful for the existence of such structures, since they alone have given us the joys of resistance.

Is there a kind of authority that would be immune to rebellion and protest? What would a world built around such a notion look like? I suppose it would be a world not tyrannized by memory, and free from the collective coercion derived from the brittle mythic past. Henry David Thoreau, iconoclast, skeptic, nature mystic, wrote of such an authority in his famous essay "On Walking":

"He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past…His philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours. There is something suggested by it not in

Plato nor the New Testament. It is a newer testament – the Gospel according to this moment."

But how many of us can truly live according to such a Gospel?

Even worse, in my experience, than living with an external authority that I cannot abide is inflicting authority from inside myself on others. Thus, as Director of the MBSF and the editor of this volume, I must conclude this introduction as soon as possible.

David Shulman