

A philosophical and theological insight towards understanding the difference between the concepts of authority and power

**Authors:**

Mojalefa L.J. Koenane¹ 
Mokhele J.S. Madise¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Philosophy,
College of Human Sciences,
University of South Africa,
Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Mojalefa Koenane,
koenamlj@unisa.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 02 Aug. 2018

Accepted: 09 Feb. 2019

Published: 25 Mar. 2019

How to cite this article:

Koenane, M.L.J. & Madise, M.J.S., 2019, 'A philosophical and theological insight towards understanding the difference between the concepts of authority and power', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5212. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5212>

Copyright:

© 2019. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

In this article, we seek to clarify the difference between the two concepts: authority and power. We are well aware that, in our everyday language, these two concepts are erroneously used interchangeably. This is because people take it for granted that these concepts mean exactly the same thing. We disagree: these concepts may have a relationship; however, they do not always denote the same meaning. Some people are of the opinion that because they are in authority, they must 'lord it over' others. Sometimes, there are multiple messages from conflicting authorities; in such cases, which authority must be obeyed? Our purpose is to critique this view and suggest the one that we believe is tenable, which is authority as service, an idea that is promoted by Jesus Christ in the Gospels.

Introduction

In our everyday language, we erroneously use the two concepts of authority and power interchangeably. We do concede that there is a relationship between the two, but also wish to argue that power on its own can come about without authority. For instance, there are people who are powerful as a result of other resources, such as money. A person who is powerful because of his or her money may not necessarily have authority. In certain instances an individual or a group may have influence without any form of authority. A good example lies with socio-political influence, which depends on the given context or environment. As such, money is a resource that makes people powerful, which also means without this resource, such a person would lose his or her power. As our point of departure, we look at the etymology of the concept of authority. In order to have an accurate understanding of the term, we consulted Hornby's (1974) *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, which suggests the following meanings for the term 'authority':

1. Power to enforce obedience.
2. Power or right to give orders.
3. Authority as something that can be exercised.

From these three definitions we can deduce a relationship between authority and power. We also understand power as the characteristic of authority – power defines authority. Authority without power is devoid and unworthy of the name – but one needs to be careful here; equally important is the fact that authority with too much concentrated power is also a problem. This means authority must have limited powers. Further, we argue that the position of authority legitimises one's *will*. Put differently, an individual who is in authority has certain powers that go with that position. No individual can have authority without power. We also deduce that authority has everything to do with exercising power, that is, with giving order to others – orders that should be carried out and not challenged or questioned. In most cases, people who are powerful and whose powers are not based on any authority are feared and not respected. As such, we believe that people with authority are usually respected and not feared. If a person is feared more than he or she is respected, and people then overcome their fear of this individual and the source of power is removed from him or her or nullified, he or she is left with nothing because no one ever respected them.

Although the aforementioned dictionary does not go any further, we would like to argue here that defying the orders of authority incurs punitive measures. This means that any person who defies a direct order from the one in authority would be risking a punishment of some sort. Under general circumstances, in a situation where a client is dissatisfied with the service he or she received and wants to register a formal complaint, one would ask, who is in charge here? The implication of this question has everything to do with accountability or responsibility.

Read online:

Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

As such, it could be expressed differently: who is the ultimate accountable officer here? Thus the connotation of such a quest takes us to authority as a position of service. Hence, 'to be in authority' means to be a servant of people under one's authority. Therefore, from a biblical perspective, especially that of the New Testament, or at least from Christ's viewpoint, authority that lacks service is lording it over others, which is in our view an abuse of authority. This will be discussed further at a later stage.

Relationship between the concepts of author and authority

In an informal academic discussion, the author disclosed to an academic friend of his that he was planning on writing a paper on authority. The friend, who became interested in some of the author's ideas, pointed out that it would be imperative to point out the relationship between the concepts of author and authority. The author immediately noticed the relationship and came to the realisation that it was apparent even to the naked eye. It is easy to see the authority or power an author commands in the writing of a script. None of the characters involved in the script command such authority; the author is the one to decide who dies, who is the killer, how a character dies or leaves and so on. In a sense, the author is the god of his or her script or play. In any play, it is the *will* of the author that is done. This brings us to the Almighty God as author, that is, the Creator of the universe; as such, St Paul in the Letter to the Romans 9:17–21 suggests that even when some do not do God's will, it is because it was so designed by God himself. St Paul writes:

For in scriptures he says to Pharaoh: It was for this I raised you up, to use you as a means of showing my power and to make my name known throughout the world. In other words, when God wants to show mercy he does, and when he wants to harden someone's heart he does so. You will ask me, in that sense how can God ever blame anyone, since no one can oppose his will? But what right have you a human being, to cross-examine God? The pot has no right to say to the potter: Why did you make me this shape? Surely the potter can do what he likes with the clay? (Rom 9: vv. 17–21)

We refer to this biblical text to support the argument that the author, in this case the potter (i.e. God the author of life), with his power is the ultimate decider in matters of life and the universe he created with the purpose of doing his *will*, whatever that will is. Furthermore, St Paul refers to God's power, which is in Christian or religious terms divine power. We hear in the Old Testament how God created the world through his Word – 'Let there be [...]' and there was (the story of creation in Genesis 1). Again, this draws us to the power of the word for the one who has authority. Furthermore, the Bible teaches us that God's purpose is for humankind to do his *will*. The divine power also allows individuals to exercise their free will to do God's *will* or to choose not to do it. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (representing God's kingdom) and the consequent punishment that was imposed on them by God resulted from their failure to obey (disobeying God) the authority of God, obeying the

serpent instead (see the story of the fall in Genesis 3). Because God is the author of the universe and all that is part thereof, it is he who imposed punishment on Adam and Eve and the serpent. All three (i.e. the serpent, the woman and the man) received different punishments (Gn 3:14–19). Furthermore, the Old Testament is full of incidents of disobedience in the relationship between God and his chosen people.

Conflicting orders from different authorities

Following the orders of authority is not an easy matter today; perhaps in the olden days it was. Changing and new challenges call for new thinking and reactions from individuals. This claim is supported by two examples, both from the South African context. In the first instance, imagine a dedicated Christian or Catholic nurse who is ordered to assist in the termination of a pregnancy at a government hospital. This nurse is aware of her church's position on termination of pregnancy. She must take part in the termination, but at the same time she is aware that taking part means she could be excommunicated by her church authorities. If she refuses to take part, she could be expelled from work or disciplined in any other way the hospital authorities decide. She is in a dilemma. What should she do – she is confused, which authority must she obey and why? Put differently, whose orders must be carried out? On the one hand, there is the church authority with its demands, and on the other hand is the hospital authority, which expects her to perform certain duties and by which she is employed and paid. The question is: who should this nurse listen to? We need to take into consideration that in certain professions and jobs, taking orders from those in position of authority is an expectation.

In the second instance, consider the following example. Traditionally, marriage was considered as such only between a man and a woman. Both the church and the state agreed on what constitutes a marriage, and one of the elements was that marriage was marriage if and only if the two people entering the marriage contract were people of the opposite sex. In other words, marriage between two people of the same sex was forbidden. Recently, South Africa has joined other countries in allowing same sex unions, to be politically correct; these are referred to as 'civil unions'. This has implications for the church. To begin with, in legal terms people who are appointed as marriage officers are granted this privilege by the state. As such, because they are appointed by the state as marriage officers, their immediate authority in a sense is the state that has appointed them. However, the matter is not as simple as it looks – although these marriage officers are appointed by the state, they are also ordained by the church. In other words, they are accountable to two conflicting authorities.

On the one hand, the South African government expects that when a marriage officer is approached by a same sex couple who wish to enter into a civil union, then the marriage

officer is required by virtue of being appointed by the government to solemnise this marriage. On the other hand, certain churches¹ or religions (especially those that remain conservative) refuse to accept same sex marriage as marriage. In fact, in the Roman Catholic Church, this is one of the grounds for annulling² a marriage. Therefore, the Catholic Church would under no circumstances allow their priests (most of whom are state-appointed marriage officers) to solemnise such a marriage. This speaks to the dilemma brought about by today's conventional ideas and way of life. This is a complicated matter for the church as well as for marriage officers.

According to Gula (1989:153), for Catholics the *magisterium* is the ultimate authority in moral matters, and as such its teachings must be taken seriously. The conflicting orders from different authorities is a serious problem that leaves an unassuming individual in a serious moral dilemma. The nurse is depending on her church to make a good decision – it is the same church that teaches her and its members to obey state authorities. It is generally agreed that appealing to authority, especially in times of doubt, is a good thing; however, when different authorities clash on the same matter, then appealing to authority may require reasons for choosing one alternative over the other. These examples are typical of conflicting orders from institutions that are not in agreement on certain moral matters, where a serious moral dilemma may occur to individuals who belong to both the state and a given religion.

It is a well-known fact that since the Middle-Ages there has been a struggle for dominance, that is for power, between the church and the state. It is also true that nations have used their power to dominate other nations to such an extent that language has changed over time – Roman Empire, British Empire, Russian Empire. In the recent past, the war against Iraq (initiated by the US and its allies) and the current attack on Syria are examples of power by the US. The dominance between nations is exemplified by tension between Britain and Ireland, while tension between religions is exemplified by the Irish Catholics and Protestants, Catholics and Muslims in Nigeria and elsewhere, and Palestine and Israel. In all of these conflicts, the struggle for domination or power has been at the centre. One needs to concede the horrible truth as it appears in the definition of justice by Thrasymachus: more often than not, might or power is right and justice serves the interest of the strong or powerful (Hourani 1962:110–111). Thrasymachus' statement on justice is problematic because at different times he gave two contradictory statements. Besides the noted opinion on his understanding of justice, he also contended that 'just action is obedience to the laws of one's state'. In an attempt to simplify Thrasymachus' statement, Hourani (1962) outlines and summarises the dialogue between Thrasymachus and Socrates as follows:

1. Reference to churches in the plural is an attempt not to exclude any religious denominations; this is inclusive of all religions.

2. Because divorce is not permitted in the Catholic Church, dissolving a marriage is granted only under certain conditions, and this is not regarded as divorce but annulment.

1. Socrates – Then it is the government which is the master in the city? Answer by Thrasymachus: It is.
2. Socrates – Well every government lays down laws for its advantage – a democracy – democratic laws, and a tyranny – tyrannical laws and so on.
3. Socrates – In laying down these laws, they have made it plain that what is to their advantage is just for their subjects. They punish him [*sic*] who departs from this as a law-breaker and unjust man [*sic*].

In this dialogue, Socrates is trying to point out to Thrasymachus that the two statements – on justice serving the interests of the mighty or strong and the one suggesting just action as obedience to the laws of one's state – are not communicating the same message; they are contradictory. Put into St Thomas' words, the two statements defy what he referred to as the first principles of knowledge, namely the law of non-contradiction, simply put, and the same thing cannot be what it is not. Getting back to Thrasymachus' second opinion, namely: 'just action(s) is obeying the laws of one's state', it is easy to come to the conclusion that in the case of a nurse who is expected by the state to assist in performing abortion because it is the law (in most countries) for a pregnant woman to be able to terminate when she so wishes, the nurse should obey the authority of the government. The same applies in the case of a government-appointed ordained marriage officer. However, with the contradiction in Thrasymachus' two statements as established by Socrates, it is not that simple to arrive at the right thing to do. The nurse and the ordained marriage officer are still in the moral dilemma.

In an attempt to resolve tension between two competing powers (authorities), some have suggested as the solution that the church is the primary authority in religious matters (that is, everything dealing with faith and morality). It is apparent that one of these authorities is right and the other wrong; in other words, these authorities cannot both be correct, especially for anyone who ascribes to St Thomas Aquinas' theory of first principles. Aquinas contended that there are first principles for all knowledge, such as the law of non-contradiction in epistemology and the law of benevolence in ethics (Pegis 1960). However, our concern is with the law of non-contradiction in epistemology. St Thomas argued that the same thing cannot be right and wrong at the same time and in the same sense. With this in mind, we believe there is a contradiction in cases where one authority gives orders that are opposed by another authority – this is a dilemma for the person who receives these orders, namely to perform a certain function while at the same time being ordered by another authority not to perform it. It must be taken into account that in the eyes of the recipients, both these authorities are equal. This was clearly demonstrated in the Middle Ages by the church and the state between the Pope and the Emperor blurring their powers across their respective institutions.

Defining the concept of power

In the olden days during the struggle of apartheid, the black people of South Africa adopted the slogan *Amandla* [power] as a motivating factor to keep fighting the regime. It should be noted that for black people in South Africa, the apartheid regime was considered an illegitimate authority because black people were not allowed to participate in the elections that would legitimise a government of the day through one man-one vote.

Therefore, this meant for black people the white-only elected government was an authority that was always problematic and as such had no legitimacy to govern the country; in other words, it was in power but lacked authority. Legitimacy means a socially, religiously, politically and psychologically acknowledged right to exercise power. In this way, legitimacy and power are the two sides of the same coin, that is, authority. As a way of enforcing its rule over black people and all others who resisted its authority, the Nationalist government used state institutions such as the police and defence forces to intimidate and punish those who were deemed rascals and terrorists. Obviously a legitimate government would not stoop this low to have its *will* done.

Around the same time this slogan was popularised, the Nationalist Party popularised the idea of 'Unity is strength/power', thus urging Afrikaners to rally and unite against all enemies of the regime. We often hear the following words during the opening and closing of graduation ceremonies at university as well as in parliament openings: 'through the powers invested in me I declare (...)'. This seriously poses the question: what then is *amandla* or power?

'Power' is taken from the Latin term *potare*, which comes from another Latin word, *potis*, which means 'powerful'. 'Power' further denotes any of the following: might, control, strength, lordship and dominion over others. Looked at from another perspective, 'power' can be defined as the ability to impose one's *will* on others in such a way that if the *will* of the powerful is not done then there are or will be consequences. Apparently, all of these words are intimidating in their outlook. In our view, the idea of power is intimidating and not a practical one to promote peace in conflicting situations and among conflicting religions and countries. Whenever the words 'power' and 'powerful' are brought into any debate, they seem to invoke resistance from others and to impose rather than negotiating in good faith. In times of negotiation in any environment, be it religious or secular (that is, political), involved parties want to negotiate as equals – any idea of someone negotiating from a powerful position is regarded as negotiating in bad faith as well as trying to dominate the other and subdue them rather than arriving at a mutual agreement. From a religious perspective, one senses that the idea of ecumenism (unity of Christian religions and faith in general) failed because certain religious denominations wanted to enforce their will on others or have dominion over others. In other words, the church in its entirety did not

negotiate as equals. Equality in ethical matters is an essential element for this reason. Ramose (2014:74) rightly contends that the ethical imperative of dialogue is that all human beings be regarded as equals. Hill (1988:2) refers to this as anti-ecumenism and anti-collegiality. In any case, the history of the church and the state is also characterised by a power struggle – who should have what powers, who should have more control and so on. The division that occurred between these two powerful institutions was and still is based on a power struggle.

Authority as service

The term 'authority' can be understood by its secular or political meaning or from its religious or theological perspective. When understood purely from a secular meaning, it denotes something different from its religious or theological sense. On the one hand, the political meaning of the term 'authority' is an unassailable position from which a person may impose his or her will or possess the power to enforce obedience from others. Disobedience is regarded as an offence punishable by law – this is also regarded in lay terms as insubordination. Therefore, authority possesses power that is legitimised by an institution; thus authority is an institutionalised concept. We believe that once there is institutionalisation, there will always be some kind of concentration of power with a hope of controlling and enforcing an ideology. Again, the emphasis is on the fact that the one in authority has a monopoly on giving orders that cannot be questioned. The same applies for authority in a religious environment. The common characteristic is the fact that authority in both cases is an institutionalised concept. Two examples would cover both the political understanding of authority and the religious understanding of the same concept. Looked at from a political environment, a government officer who is legitimately elected to represent us in parliament can make decisions on our behalf without first getting permission from us and may enforce actions that do not benefit us. However, this does not mean that the government can exercise unlimited power while in authority. It is for this reason that political philosophers such as Locke, Hume, Rousseau and others advocated for restriction of political power or that limited, non-concentrated power must be vested into the authority. In his work, *The Republic*, Plato took this even further: he believed that only philosophers must be kings or rulers. Plato basically believed that philosophers would be ideal rulers because of their pursuit of knowledge (philosopher kings); his main reason was that to be a good ruler one needs knowledge and not power. In criticising Plato's ideal city 'the *Kallipos*', Matassa (2013) argues that:

... although theoretically it would be ideal if 'the *kallipos*' or the city and the modern state were ruled by knowledge and not power, power is crucial in the make-up of political activity. (p. 2)

For us it does not look like Matassa understands the fundamentals of Plato's argument. It is our view that Plato was aware of how much power (concentrated power) was invested in the rulers of his own city, and it was the exercise of this power that Plato was concerned with. In defence of

Plato's position, we wish to clarify for anyone who may be sceptical about Plato's thesis on government that for him, governing was a tactical business that required those in office to have specialised skills; without these specialised skills many things could go wrong – again, Africa and South Africa are both clear evidence of Plato's concern. Actually, in Plato's language, governing and governance belong to what he regarded as a 'specific craft'. For Plato, governing required one in such a powerful position to have a special training. Wolff (2006:68) puts it thus: 'Ruling [...] is a skill which requires special training'. It is our view that Plato's idea of philosopher kings represents knowledgeable and skilful individuals in high offices of authority – a skilful person who must at all times appeal not to power but to reason.

On the other hand, the religious meaning of the term does not seem to offer any alternative to the secular meaning of the concept. Religious leaders do make decisions without necessarily involving their religious communities (Christians or religious followers). In other words, they know what is best for their congregations, and they do not owe anyone an explanation. In the case of the Catholic Church, a priest can just tell the congregation that for more explanation they can contact the local bishop, who can also tell them to contact Rome. In simple terms, this means that those in authority or who have the power to make decisions have made those decisions and everyone else must comply or be obedient to the hierarchy.

Another example in the Catholic Church of an institutionalised authority is in the appointment of bishops.

Insofar as we can tell, the practice of appointing diocesan bishops for various dioceses is a decision not taken by an ordinary local church or a given diocese; it is a decision taken elsewhere. To the best of our knowledge, it is Rome that appoints bishops; further it is Rome that decides on the criteria for the appointment of bishops. Therefore, the idea of authority as service is a dream. The reality is that when in authority, you must lord it over others. The one in authority is the one people must tremble before; the person in authority is the one who is served, not the other way round. Therefore, in one way or another, in both the political and religious environments there is this sense of absolute power that John Acton warned us against. For now, we turn our attention to the New Testament teachings on authority.

Authority in the New Testament

In both the Old and the New Testaments, we do find explicit mention of the term 'authority'. However, our focus is mainly on the New Testament, in particular Christ's view of how authority works in the kingdom of his Father, that is the kingdom of God. What does Jesus Christ teach us about authority? A careful reading of the Bible, especially Jesus' teaching on the same, seems to lead us to a different conclusion; his was a redefinition of authority. Christ in the New Testament clearly differentiates between secular

(i.e. political) authority and that of those who claim to be his followers. Secular authority is represented by the authority of figures such as Herod, Caesar and Pilate, to mention a few. Christ understood and taught his disciples (i.e. followers) that authority is ministerial. For this reason, in his work entitled *Ministry and Authority in the Catholic Church*, Hill (1988:11) draws a paradox between the two concepts of ministry and authority. He further avers that the concept of ministry comes from the Greek word *diakonia*, which means 'service'. Further, Hill (1988) suggests that to speak of ministerial authority seems to be a contradiction. We agree with Hill's suggestion that ministerial authority is a contradiction because the two concepts contradict each other: they both point to the opposite of the other. As we pointed out earlier when we analysed the concept of authority, it in fact points to the position of power; we further noted that when in authority, one expects others to serve him or her. Therefore, from the logic of the definitions we gave of 'authority', it is indeed a contradiction to entertain the idea of the serving master or ministerial authority.

In the Gospel of St Mark (10:35–41), the two brothers James and John (sons of Zebedee) approached Jesus and proposed that they sit one at the right hand and the other at the left hand of Christ in his kingdom. We are interested in verses 42 through 45, which specifically present Christ's response to the request of the two brothers. It reads as follows:

You know that among the pagans³ their so-called rulers lord it over [sic] them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son did not come to be served but to serve. [...]⁴

The text is obvious and does not need too much explanation. We did point out that, for Christ, authority is about ministering or serving – he did not mince words about his understanding and practical experience of worldly (political) authority. They lord it over their subjects. They give orders, they are served, and they are the bosses. For Christ, the pagans make their authority felt. It is about power; people in power ensure that such power is felt. To his disciples, Christ is emphatic that 'this must not happen among you'. His authority is different – he is the master and yet he is one who serves his followers. This service is also evident at the washing of his disciples' feet in the Gospel of St John 13. At the Last Supper, when Christ washes his disciples' feet, Peter reacts in a worldly fashion. According to Verse 8: 'Never!' said Peter. 'You shall never wash my feet'. Seemingly Peter with his experience knew that in the world he lived in, it was he who should wash Jesus' feet and not the other way round. This is how the world operates. In John 13:13, Jesus is the Master; he is Lord to his disciples (the Latin version has it as *Magister et Dominus*) – therefore it is they who must wash his feet. It looks as though Jesus' disciples do not understand

3: Pagans' refers to secular or political rulers.

4: There is a parallel text in Matthew 20:25–28; further we also wish to state that the translation we relied on is that of *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1990).

their master's teaching; namely, among pagans, their rulers that is authority, lords it over them. The disciples do not understand that he is the Master who came to serve and not to be served. The things Jesus has taught them about authority as serving do not seem to sink into their minds. Their authority must resemble his; they must wash each other's feet – in so doing, 'everyone will know that you are my disciples'. Thus the emphasis is not on authority but on service, a radical change in their understanding of service. This radical change is supported by this humble service, namely the washing of the feet.

This radical redefinition of authority as service is not only about exercising power, that is lording it over others, by pagan rulers. Jesus included the Pharisees, the chief priests and the elders as well, who according to him sit in Moses' seat. Jesus' view of the Pharisees and Jewish elders' leadership, especially their exercise of power, is not an optimistic one. Their authority was no different from that of the pagan rulers. They oppressed those under their leadership; as such disciples should not follow their example. In the New Testament, the Pharisees appear at all times as challenging the authority of Christ – 'by what authority do you do these things? or who gave you authority to do these things?' (see Mt 21:23–27; Mk 11:27–33; Lk 20:1–8). This could only suggest one thing: leaders, even religious leaders, of Jesus' time were not comfortable with his new style of leadership, and therefore they questioned the source of his authority. Their authority emphasised power and absolute power to decide the fate of their subjects. Theirs was not authority that is interested in the good of subjects.

Ministry, which we understood to be the Greek *diakonia* or service, outlines the relationship between ministry and minister. This suggests that even the political title 'minister of [...] must be understood from a perspective of service, but unfortunately in the secular world that is not the case. Insofar as Christ was concerned, authority embodied moral power to serve and lead by example.

In fact, this is mostly where ministers exercise absolute power and thus leave the society wondering. In the political environment of South Africa, we have witnessed this kind of power even to the extent of its abuse (i.e. abuse of power that is accompanied by extreme arrogance). Currently in most governments, including our own here in South Africa, it is disconcerting to see the abuse of power of the majority parties in how they advance their individual and group interests at the expense of society. If one understands the principles of Batho Pele, the manner through which authority is exercised leaves much to be desired. The traditional expression we all are familiar with, which is attributed to John Acton, is as follows:

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men [*sic*] are almost always bad men [*sic*] even when they exercise influence and not authority; still more when you superadd the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority. (<http://www.acton.org/research/lord-acton-quote-archive>)

According to Geisler and Feinberg (1987:353), the preceding citation is the direct opposite of that held by some Greek philosophers, such as Thrasymachus, who believed that 'justice is the interest of the stronger party' or, simply put, 'might is right' (Hourani 1962:110). Geisler and Feinberg argue that this statement relates to political power. We disagree. We believe that it describes not only political power but power in general, especially power held by those who use or misuse their positions of power. There are numerous examples, even in the South African political environment. The idea that might is right is the practice Jesus warned his disciples against.

On its own, power is something neutral; it is neither positive nor negative. It becomes negative when it is used to dominate and lord it over others; it becomes negative when it is abused. This statement suggests that power could be something negative. It further suggests that there is a problem if the basis of such power is anything other than authority. The basis of power can be anything other than legitimate authority. We have pointed out that money can also be a resource and the basis of one person's power; we further argued that in such instances it goes without saying that the absence of money or bankruptcy on the part of an individual who became powerful because of his or her money would mean the end of this person's power and respect. Geisler and Feinberg (1987:354) rightly maintain that there is a difference between power and goodness; for the purpose of this article, we maintain that one can have authority without necessarily exercising power that forms part of being in authority (unless it is compulsory to do so), while one can be powerful without having any authority – military coup d'états and tyrannical governments are examples. This is where power is might in the full sense of the word. Popper (1966) was also concerned about too much power vested in politicians, maintaining that it is wrong to place political power in the hands of the elite.

Conclusion

The article focused on two terms that are usually used almost synonymously. We argued that these two concepts may be related but that they each have their own characteristics and do not have the same connotation; thus it is wrong to use them synonymously or interchangeably. In the definition of the two words, we pointed out that one can have authority without necessarily exercising power unless it is required for one in authority to do so. We also indicated that to have power does not necessarily mean a person must be in authority. In other words, the source of power need not necessarily be authority. We supported this by stating that a person may have money as his or her source of power, which means that once this source of power is no longer there, such as if a person loses everything, he or she loses even the respect they thought they had.

We further drew a relationship between the concepts of author and authority, stating the authority of the author, whose power is evident in his or her script or play. The author determines the characters of his or her script as well as

their fate. This lets us understand that the author's *will* prevails in the script and that everybody else does the *will* of the author. God is portrayed as the author of the universe; as such, his purpose for the universe is for it to obey and do his *will*.

In our attempt to support the difference between power and authority, we looked into the New Testament, in particular how Christ understood service. Having established that, among secular rulers, those who are in power lord it over others, we then heard how the power of authority should be exercised. In order to do this, we referred to how Christ himself understood service and even went as far as saying his disciples must not consider Jewish elders' and Pharisees' examples of leadership as good; they must not follow their examples even though they were in Moses' position as leaders. To justify this position, we argued that in the New Testament, Christ redefined or gave the concept of authority a new meaning (particularly for his disciples). Christ's new and radical definition of authority emphasised ministerial authority, which is the serving authority. We argued that Jesus' concept of authority embodied what we referred to as 'moral power', which means leading by an example of service.

We also proposed that the combination of ministry and authority brings us closer to believing that once an individual is a minister it must also be understood from a service perspective. In South Africa, this service perspective is also emphasised by our very own government in its commendable principles of Batho Pele (i.e. People First).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.L.J. K. was the primary author and project leader. M.J.S.M. was the co-author and ensured that proper language editing characterises the manuscript.

References

- Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, *Lord Acton quote archive*, viewed 17 April 2018, from <http://www.acton.org/research/lord-actonquote-archie>
- Geisler, N.L. & Feinberg, P.D., 1987, *Introduction to philosophy: A Christian perspective*, Baker Book House, MI.
- Gula, R.M., 1989, *Reason informed by faith: Foundations of Catholic morality*, Paulist Press, New Jersey.
- Hill, E., 1988, *Ministry and authority in the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London.
- Hornby, A.S., 1974, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hourani, G.F., 1962, 'Justice is serving the interests of the stronger', *Phronesis* 7(2), 110–120. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852862X00070>
- Matassa, G., 2013, 'Plato's argument for rule by philosophers', viewed 23 February 2018, from http://www.eir.info/2013/04/17/should_philosophers-rule/
- Pegis, A.C., (ed.), 1960, *Summa theological: Basic writing of St. Thomas Aquinas*, St Peter's Seminary, Bangalore.
- Popper, K., 1966, *The open society and its enemies*, 5th edn., Routledge, London.
- Ramose, M.B., 2014, 'Dying a hundred deaths: Socrates on truth and justice', *Phronimon* 15(1), 67–80. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/2213>
- The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1990, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., City Garden, NY.
- Wolff, J., 2006, *An introduction to political philosophy*, 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford.