

Popes, Titles, Deference, and Power

by

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Worldwide attention to the death of a man known as Pope John Paul II and the selection of Pope Benedict XVI, set me to pondering a strange aspect of human psychology. How is it that human beings born equally into a natural universe, with the same relationship to its creator, came to diminish themselves and cede power to others? Why did we at some point accept the notion that titled beings deserve such deference?

As a man from Poland, Karol Wojtyla, seems to me to have been committed to serve his fellow humans and I honor him for unselfish devotion to the welfare of others. This piece does not deal with him or his successor personally, but asks why humans historically developed "divine and official" titles that conditioned the many to arbitrarily place themselves in an inferior status in the hierarchy of various forms of power. This attribution of special powers apparently started long ago, when a few humans invented the ideas that a "god created a priesthood as its interpreters" and that "kings had a divine right to rule." This notion of divine "anointment" also carried over to those "officially appointed" by priests or kings. It then infected our thinking about all "officials."

These comments are not about people who train themselves to run faster than others, to know more about internal organs and disease, or to master the use of art or technology. They are not about recognizing that from time to time a group of people ask one of their members to take on special roles for the whole group. Here I ask, "Why do we deify or sanctify some people, believing they can access a realm we can't, and thus give them psychological power over us?"

What happens psychologically when we see a person as "Doctor Jones," rather than "Harold Jones, the doctor;" "President Bush" instead of "George Bush, the president;" "Pope John Paul, in lieu of "John, the pope;" "Professor Huang", versus "Ting Huang, the professor." etc.? In each case we cede a certain amount of our personal power to them. We allow ourselves to be dependent on them for choices and directions we could figure out for ourselves. Do we transfer a degree of authority and responsibility to them to let us escape accountability?

"Doctor, my cure lies in your hands, I depend on you." "Mr. President, I don't question that you know better about war than I do." "Your Holiness, you are closer to God than I, so please intercede on my behalf." "Professor, teach me so I don't have to learn." How many ways can you think of where you have "passed the buck" to a figure that you placed on a pedestal? What's the pay-off for both the alleged powerful and the accepting subservient?

In my checkered career, I have been given many titles, ordained as reverend, then academic and naval officer ranks, followed by diplomatic ones. All along the way, I saw people defer to me, give more weight to my opinions than they merited, keep me at a distance from their true feelings and views, and assign me the blame for events in their lives. At first, I felt very powerful and believed I must deserve such status. But, a part of my self kept whispering, "It's false."

At some point, I started to consider the trade-offs I had made. In the naval and diplomatic services, I began to be shocked by what I and my colleagues did (regardless of its inconsistency with the values of our country or its citizens) in the scramble for the "official" title of Admiral or

Ambassador. I began to see why such titles were more than labels for work. Culturally and psychologically they, like Holy Father, King, President, etc., had assumed archetypal status due to their historical connection with the concept of "heavenly origins of special powers." People wearing the mantle of "officialdom" (even in so-called democracies) or "ordination" were ascribed power beyond human skills and job descriptions.

I began to wonder who the first humans were to kowtow (kneel and touch the forehead to the ground) to other humans who had assumed divine titles. Were they forced to do so, and for what reason? Did some voluntarily give up their equal status as humans to gain something for themselves? Where did the first model of a king or a priest arise? Did humans invent it? If so, on what life experience did they base it? What were the psychological implications?

The answers to these questions seem so deeply buried in human history that we have forgotten what it might have meant to be free to address one another as equals regardless of the function one might play in society. Did we miss an opportunity to develop in a different direction? One where each person would take more responsibility for individual and group decisions, and be accountable for what happened as a consequence. Did it divert humans from their natural path?

Would we have less war, less exploitation of others and our natural habitat, and a deeper sense of individual participation in the destiny of our planet? Would we have healthier individuals and more honest and transparent institutions? Would life take on a different meaning if all of us used only the name given at birth? In ancient times among traditional peoples, each person's name was selected through an effort to capture the essence of the individual. The name so chosen became the way that person behaved and was labeled throughout life.

My research has shown the institutions of priesthood and kingship arose when humans began to deify some advanced beings—the gods of old—when they did not understand who they were, treating them as divine or supernatural. Rather than incorporating them into a natural model of the universe, people began to form cults to worship them. In doing so, they assigned to humans the status of inferior or fallen beings. Power-seeking individuals were then able to take advantage of a culturally-shaped, inferiority complex to gain control of masses.

I now feel so strongly about the history of all such titles that divide us from one another that I request people address me by my given name. Even when some call me "Sir" to keep me at a distance, I request they call me Paul. I jokingly say, "I haven't been called SIR since the enlisted Navy chiefs called me that as a junior officer—to put me in my place." I have had a great deal of fun over the years with Presidents, Princes, Ambassadors, Secretaries, etc., by conniving ways to address them without using the honorific titles that would give them this psychological edge. I believe they and I behaved more authentically for it.

[Contact Paul Von Ward by mail at P.O. Box 1776, Daholonega, GA 30533 or by email at paul@vonward.com. His website is www.vonward.com. His book *Gods, Genes, & Consciousness* discusses the history of the phenomenon described in this article and much more forgotten history.)