

Changes in Authority

by Jan de Wildt

I was the eldest son in a family of 6 children. Five boys and one girl. Authority of my parents, above all my father, was for me a matter of course. Just like the authority of my neighbour, who was a policeman and of the teachers at school. Also an important element of authority was the Roman-Catholic church, which in a certain amount determined life. In the days of my childhood, - the years 40 and 50- here in the Netherlands was still plenty of what we called, the denominational segregation. That is to say: all social life was organized round the churches and denominations. As a catholic boy I attended a catholic school, a catholic sports club, my parents voted on a catholic party, we were members of a catholic radio broadcast, we read a catholic paper.

The schools I attended were boy's schools, because a mixed education was not used in catholic circles of those days. The fathers, who were in charge at grammar schools, were people of great authority.

When I was seventeen I went to the university in Amsterdam. I wanted to study politics and social science. For this study was also a faculty at the University of Nijmegen, but I went to Amsterdam – a clearly socialistic coloured. University- I could then stay at home and my parents could keep an eye on my conduct.

There in Amsterdam I came in touch with many different ideas, my view widened. The first time professors had still much authority but when the sixties emerged more and more critics came from the students. Dissatisfaction about books, which we had to read and the way lectures were given. In this way I saw breaches in authority coming. Just after completing my study there have been great student's uprisings, it was the beginning of different time.

I was more than thirty years a civil servant, especially at municipalities, and I have also witnessed how authority changed in the government. Civil organizations had from early on a strong hierarchy with different layers. The higher-grade civil servants had authority. When I myself rose in the organization I did find it difficult. Authority easily becomes power and abuse of power. "You'll have to do it, because I say so!" In course of the years there were big reorganizations, fewer ranks came in the organizations, the organization became flatter. I also learned that authority must be deserved by being clear and honest about your intentions.

The relation between government and civilian changed profoundly in the thirty years that I worked as a civil servant. The civilians became more critical and emancipated, civil servants and governors had to learn to listen and help to think with the civilians. It was often said: You must see the civilian as a customer.

That was actually not the right approach. The government is not a shop where you buy something; the municipality is a matter of all of us, the society.

You cannot as a civilian think of your own benefit; you are a part of the society.

In my life two big fundamental changes have left their marks: the secularization or to say the crumbling away of the influence of the churches and the individualizing: the weakening of the communal sense.

There are some people of my generation who have experienced their youth controlled by the churches as oppressive. I have good memories of my childhood and have joined the developments that took place in the churches. I am active in church but no longer as follower of the authority, but as someone who helps thinking and takes his own responsibility.

I have trouble with the loss of communal sense and with the government who loses its authority. There are only few people member of a political party and that distresses me. Too many people think in “we – the civilians” and “they- the government”

Authority is no longer a matter of course, not between parents and children, not within the churches, not in official organizations and not in politics. That is the great difference with my childhood.