

The Roman Catholic Church's construction of authority through persuasion

Background

Authority demands obedience, yet it precludes the use of coercion by force and violence, and persuasion by arguments (Arendt, 1958). Obedience is then a voluntary submission to authority. In this sense, the term authority seems incompatible with the social psychological definition of authority that is obeyed through direct orders.

Methods

Using discourse analysis, we examine how the Roman Catholic Church constructs the legitimisation of its authority as a defender of the common good of society against the threat of homosexuality in its official documentation. In particular, we highlight the rhetorical structures used to call upon public opinion in obstructing the introduction of equality laws for homosexual people.

Findings

We suggest that the Roman Catholic Church needs to use persuasive language because it has lost its authority over citizens. Thus, in its documents discourse is rhetorically structured to claim authority. As authority cannot be assumed, it is not an example of obedience, but rather a call for obedience is made through the use of rhetoric.

Discussion

In social psychology we assume that obedience to direct orders is an effect of authority. On the contrary, we argue that if a supposed authority, such as the Roman Catholic Church, has to use persuasive language, this is exactly because it is not a recognised authority. Also, being persuaded or following orders are not manifestations of obedience, but they construct the norm of obedience. We suggest, with reference to Arendt's definitions, that obedience follows a rhetorical pathway, exactly because religion has lost its authority.