

STUDYING RELIGION AND POWER: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges¹

PÅL REPSTAD, *University of Agder**

ABSTRACT: The article offers a historical sketch of the conceptual developments and debates regarding the concept of power in the social sciences, focusing particularly on religious power. The author points out the strengths and limitations of two ways of looking at power: first, as exercised by actors with intentions, and second, as structural constraints and forces. In terms of religious power, a distinction is made between the power of religious actors, which can include forms of power other than religious power (e.g., economic), and religious power as such, which consists mainly of relating certain structures, views, or actions to transcendent forces. Religious power in this latter sense can also be used by those who are not in religious positions. Several methodological challenges are discussed in the article, which is based in part on the author's work in studies of religion and power in Norway.

KEYWORDS: power, religious power, legitimation

BACKGROUND AND AIM

My background is in the sociology of religion, and most of my research has been on changes in mainstream organized Christianity in Norway. Some years ago I took part in a comprehensive research program on power and democracy in Norway. I then wrote a book with the subtitle *Religiøs makt i dagens Norge* [Religious power in contemporary Norway] (Repstad 2002). I had to reflect on conceptual, theoretical, and methodological choices and challenges when studying this topic. In this article I will first reflect briefly on the concept of religion. Then I will focus more in-depth on the concept of power. Finally I will try to identify some characteristics of *religious* power. Since I am inclined to combine theoretical development with empirical research, rather than only theorize from a comfortable position in my office, these conceptual and theoretical reflections will lead me to integrate some methodological reflec-

¹This paper was originally presented as an invited plenary lecture at the 10th ISORECEA conference at Iasi, Romania, April 2012. The conference theme was 'Religion and power relations in Central and Eastern Europe'. My task was to present a general overview of different understandings of power, as a background for a discussion on power and religion. This is why I have devoted much space to general discussions on conceptualizing power in general. I have, however, also commented more specifically on religious power.

*Please direct all correspondence to Pål Repstad, University of Agder.
E-mail: pal.repstad@uia.no

tions into what I have to say. If we understand religious power in a certain way, how can we find out more about power?

BROAD ENOUGH CONCEPTS—BUT NOT TOO BROAD!

“As terms, ‘power’ and ‘religion’ have at least this much in common, that to reach conceptual agreement about their precise meaning seems next to impossible.” (Borg, 2009)

This rather pessimistic statement is a quotation from Dutch sociologist Meerten Ter Borg. I agree, and I would like to add another similarity in defining both concepts. In both cases I think the challenge is to find a balance between two concerns. The first is to have a sufficiently open concept so as to attract attention to power and religion also where we might be surprised to find power or religion. Religion should not, of course, be equated with institutional religion. Many people in contemporary societies are in some sense religious even if they have little or no contact with religious organisations. As for power, some leaders will deny—with varying degrees of subjective honesty—that they exercise power, not least in a religious context. These considerations call for a wide and open definition of religion as well as of power. On the other hand, there is also a need for clear definitions, in order to make conceptual distinctions possible.

Nearly all sociology of religion textbooks discuss substantive versus functional definitions of religion—simply put, about what religion *is* versus what religion *does* to people or society (e.g. Furseth and Repstad 2006). If we expand the definition of religion to include almost any world-view, any quest for meaning, or even any transcendence of everyday thinking and living, we do so at the risk of clarity. Just to mention one problem, if religion includes all world-views, all that engages people deeply and provides meaning to their lives, the concept of secularization becomes meaningless—unless we claim that people no longer take anything seriously! So I tend to end up with a substantive working definition of religion: Religion is a network of practices and beliefs anchored in some superhuman, transcendent frame of reference. Among other things, this makes it easier to distinguish religion from non-religion in empirical research. I am very much aware that substantive definitions of religion have some contingencies and weaknesses, and I am very much interested in the relationship (power relations in particular) between religious and non-religious world-views and practices. But, to put it a bit polemically, I do not think the best approach is to incorporate everything that should be of interest to a sociologist of religion into the *definition* of religion. This is my way of conceptualizing religion, very briefly presented. However, I think that the following reflections on power in general and religious power in particular are relevant for those who prefer a wider definition of religion as well.

When trying to define power, we find the same need to strike a balance between a sufficiently comprehensive and a sufficiently clear and delimiting concept.

POWER AS EXERCISED BY ACTORS WITH INTENTIONS

I do not agree with those who distinguish between power and influence. I can see that there is a difference between using physical force and a more peaceful means of persuasion, but I find it difficult to draw a line between where power ends and influence begins. Furthermore, the distinction can easily become ideological, in the sense that power, at least in some languages, is a more negatively laden concept than influence. When religious leaders in Norway were asked some years ago whether they had power, some of them answered that they did not have power, but they modestly admitted that they had some influence (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002).

Let me sketch briefly some conceptual developments and discussions on power in the history of sociology. It is natural to start with Max Weber’s classic definition of power as the chance for people to realize their own will in communal action, even faced with the resistance

of other people (Weber 1993). This has been a very influential definition. Power is one actor's (or several actors') power over somebody else. The definition presupposes identifiable actors, and that these actors have aims. Power in Weber's sense is part of a zero-sum game. A more recent well-known version in this tradition is the American political scientist Robert A. Dahl's definition: A has power over B to the extent that A can make B do something that B would not otherwise have done (Dahl 1984).

In his text, Weber (1993) stressed in the paragraph immediately after his definition of power that power could be based on many kinds of resources. The sociologist Lewis Coser (1976) has made a long list of possible power bases. Among them are money, physical force or other means of coercion, knowledge or access to knowledge, access to networks, and control over the means of production or distribution. Coser also mentions access to sacred resources and magical abilities. This brings us to what we might call specifically religious sources of power. We will come back to them, but let us first continue our general discussion of power.

One development in the Weber tradition of power analysis has been to see power relations as relations of exchange, of barter. In this James Coleman-inspired tradition (with Weber lurking in the background), social actors have well-defined aims and strategies, and power is exercised through social exchange (Coleman 1990). Here is a simple definition of power in this tradition: To have power is to have control over something that other people want. The more you want something that somebody else controls, the more power he or she has over you. You can increase your power by changing your preferences. If you are B, and you have loved A, but now fall in love with C, A no longer has power over you – all other things being equal. Generally speaking, you can increase your power by seeking to obtain what you want elsewhere. If there are alternatives to getting something from A, you become more independent of A, and A's power over you decreases.

In this line of thinking, A and B can be individuals, but they can also be collective actors, provided these actors are characterized by a minimum of internal consensus and homogeneity. If not, it becomes necessary to perform an analysis of internal power in the group or organisation as well.

One objection that has been raised against the exchange theory of power is that other people are seen as adversaries, or at least as people that can be used for one's own purposes. Alliances are an important element in these kinds of power games, but such alliances are established because they serve one's own interests. This is a conflict-oriented view of society. Important aspects of human behaviour, such as friendship, loyalty, generosity, as well as uncertainty and doubt, are not taken into account. A possible answer from a strong spokesperson for the exchange theory would be that altruism in society is a kind of covert selfishness, such as when a caring neighbour gets prestige and thankfulness in return. Or the altruism can be interpreted as being in accordance with an actor's self-interest in the long run, building up loyalty from neighbours as elements of a power base. This may be an interesting critical perspective on the discourse of love often found in religious settings, but in my opinion there is much to be said for the objection that the exchange perspective exaggerates people's selfishness as well as their rationality.

A more comprehensive understanding of power is found in the sociological perspectives of Anthony Giddens (1984), and in Talcott Parsons' sociology (1963) before him. They define power as the capacity to transform, to intervene in a given situation so as to change it as desired. In a similar vein, Meerten Ter Borg defines power as the chance to get people to do things (2009). Here the aspect of resistance is toned down, and power is no longer seen as a zero-sum game. Power can increase the capacity of all involved. In such a perspective *power to do something* can become more interesting than *power over somebody*. Political power resembles money, according to Parsons (1986). Both are a means for a society to control nature and reach common goals. And it is possible to claim, as Bruce and Yearley do (2006), that the growth in

technology has given human beings more power over our circumstances than we used to have, so that the total amount of power has grown.

There is, I think, increasing support for this more positive view of power as a tool to get something valuable done. Still, I think it is very important to preserve the critical dimension of analyses of power. To say that all will gain from something in the long run can be a way to legitimate or veil one agent's profit in the short run, violating the interests of others.

Some critics have also maintained that outright violence, or a dominant actor's threats to use violence, are not very well described in terms of exchange. A firm adherent of the exchange perspective on power might answer that even the exercise of power through physical force could be seen as a barter transaction. One person controls something that others are interested in; namely, physical well-being and absence of pain. But it seems meaningful to distinguish the use of physical force from other kinds of power. Physical violence is a peculiarly strong and invasive type of influence. When physical power has been introduced into an arena, a conflict very often escalates, and it becomes more difficult to solve the conflict through negotiations. Moreover, physical power is never purely physical. It affects self-respect and prestige. Brute violence does not seem to be a very common means of power in modern liberal societies, but we have been reminded several times in the last two decades or so that military and physical power still plays a part in contemporary societies.

How do we empirically study power relations as exchange processes? We have to seek information about the actors' interests: what they are and how strong they are. We have to assess which resources the actors control that may be of interest to others, and we have to assess what alternatives these actors have. Some will say that the best course would be to follow specific processes over time, look at the parties' initial interests, and draw conclusions about their power based on the outcome of the processes. I do not want to discourage anybody from entering into empirical power studies, but of course there are innumerable practical methodological problems and obstacles in such studies of processes involving power relations. Just to mention a few: In such a process, where in time do we decide that the process starts and where it stops? And if we have decided a starting point, how do we identify actors' real interests at that point? Powerful actors do not necessarily show their real interests, they may embellish their motives or actions. A researcher can use media as a source, but the media do not always give a true and accurate picture. One can ask powerful people directly in interviews, but elites are not the easiest people to access. They are busy, and they may not necessarily find it advantageous to give open information to researchers. Often elites transfer a natural scepticism towards critical media to hopeful researchers.

Following a process over time, then, means to get information about relevant actions in the exchange processes. What kinds of negotiations take place? What initiatives are taken? How do other parties respond? One major problem concentrating on manifest actions, aside from the problem of getting reliable information, is the fact that often the most powerful actors involved do not have to do anything. Other interested parties may know very well about capability of the powerful ones to reward or to punish. Hence, power can be activated by anticipation, without the powerful actor having to move an inch. This also creates problems when it comes to assessing the distribution of power in a setting. There are, however, several possible ways for researchers to attack such challenges. One can approach independent informants—for instance, experienced journalists, retired bureaucrats, and so on. It is sometimes easier to study processes in the past, and there is much to be learned from such studies. But retrospective interviews have their weaknesses: People forget, and they tend to view old stories in the light of more recent experiences and their present position.

One should not confuse the volume of the voice and the amount of real power. This experience stems from a large elite survey that was part of the "Program on power and democracy" in Norway. A survey was made of several elites in politics, law, the military, and the media. Among them was also a religious elite group, operationalized as leaders in the Church of

Norway. The religious elite turned out to be more politically radical than the other elites, especially on issues concerning the environment, climate politics, and national and international socio-economic inequality (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002). In an article commenting on this study I presented several possible explanations. Members of the religious elite had the lowest level of income, although they had the highest level of education (mainly because of the academically-trained clergy). They were the oldest elite, and many of them had received radicalizing impulses as students in the 1960s and early 70s. The religious elite had more contacts with the Third World than the other elites. But probably the most relevant explanation was the fact that they were the elite least involved in actual political policy-making. The religious leaders had much less contact with the national political decision-makers than, for instance, the economic elite. It was reasonable to assume that they were able to maintain their radicalism because they did not have to enter into compromises. Their pure and proud socio-economic radicalism can be interpreted as a sign of powerlessness, as they found themselves outside important and powerful networks (Repstad 2004).

Our methodological ordeals are not over. How do we find reliable indicators when it comes to the outcome of the process? We have many of the same difficulties in getting reliable information. Those who adhere to Weber's and Robert Dahl's definition meet with an additional problem: How do we know what actor B would have 'not otherwise done'? People may change; they may revise their preferences and aspirations. This can be a result of power processes, but it can also be a result of actors becoming more mature, or other independent developments.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POWER IN THE RULES OF THE GAME

In this process perspective, we cannot assess actors' power as some kind of stable quality. We must follow concrete exchange processes, and be open to the possibility that the same actors may be powerful in one context and much less powerful in other relations and other contexts. Following specific processes may have some potential for generalization about power structures, but this possibility must be considered in each specific case.

However, some aspects of power games tend to create at least some stability over time. Power processes seldom take place in an institutional vacuum. Power processes tend to be institutionalized and formalized in patterns, such as procedures and rules. Power will often be more efficient when it is institutionalized in such procedures and rules, but it will at the same time be more bound up inside certain frames of action, and hence become more predictable. Often power struggles are performed inside such institutional frames, accepted by all parties. In power analysis, it is therefore very important to include an analysis of which actors have the power to establish or change institutional frames. You can be a not-too-clever strategist in the day-to-day power game, but it helps a lot if you can decide or influence the rules of the game. Similarly, it is often very important to decide the agenda of a meeting, or to have power to decide who shall fill important positions in a society.

HOW TO BE CRITICAL WITHOUT BEING PATERNALISTIC

So far, we have described power studies as studies of specific processes by following individual cases and assuming that the most successful outcome indicates the actor with the greatest power. These kinds of studies were criticized from the 1960s onwards. Scholars with radical political sympathies in particular claimed that these process studies caught only a small part of the world of power. Some issues are debated and politicized, while others never reach the political system or even the public sphere. Steven Lukes is a typical scholar in this critical tradition. In his book *Power: A Radical View* (1974), he claimed that an important form of power was that A could influence B to act against B's genuine interests. In other words, power can be exercised even where people are subjectively content. According to Lukes, the highest form of power is a very subtle form: namely, the power to make people think the way you want.

This point of view was met with criticism from empirically-oriented scholars. How can we say that B acts against his or her own interests? Is that not very arrogant paternalism from the researcher? And even if we accept that B can have some objective interests, how can we as researchers identify them? Lukes's answer was that the exercise of power would manifest itself if B moved to a more autonomous and less dependent position, so that he or she was able to follow his or her own interests. I once did a qualitative study of female leaders in the Church of Norway, the majority church (Repstad 2002). I asked whether they had at any time experienced discrimination. Some answered with a definite 'No'. Others said yes, and some added that they only gradually and reluctantly had become aware of this discrimination. I learned from this that the choice is not between paternalism or taking everything informants say at face value. There are many examples—not least in strict religious organisations—that people first deny that they have been oppressed and later on affirm it vehemently. Actors' own power analysis changes over time. Researchers should take seriously actors' world-views and present them in a fair way, but we cannot affirm it completely in our analysis. We should, however, have the same critical distance from the negative views of ex-insiders as we have from insiders' praise for the movement. Even researchers with an honest wish to be objective sometimes tend to accept views that they sympathize with as the result of deep and creative thinking, and reductively dismiss views that we do not like.

ACTORLESS STRUCTURAL POWER

Let us return to the development of theories of power. So far we have talked about power as something exercised by actors with intentions. A may control something B is interested in, threaten B with the use of force or other unpleasantness, influence the rules of the game, keep issues outside the decision-making system, persuade B to share A's world-view, or diminish B's self-confidence. There is always an A (or several) and a B (or several). Since around 1980 it became more common to think that power can be present without being anchored in specific actors. Increasingly, references were made to structural power, discursive power, symbolic power, actorless power, and so on. This was not new in the history of social science. One can point to Karl Marx's notion of how deeply influenced people are by the technological level and the organisation of economy in a society, or Emile Durkheim's idea that people's views and actions to a large extent are determined by the collective consciousness. These and other structural theories regained popularity in the 1970s and 1980s among many intellectuals. Feminism came along with its theories of the system of patriarchy. Michel Foucault (1980) was an important intellectual figure, with his perspectives on how systems of science and knowledge form power regimes, and his theory about the power of normality. This power lies in strong expectations to be normal. According to Foucault, in modern society we see ourselves as free agents, but we are the victims of subtle but powerful social constraints. Power is everywhere, Foucault claims. We have seen that there are methodological difficulties measuring power empirically in exchange relations between intentional actors. Such methodological challenges are even greater if we want to trace structural, actorless power. For if power is everywhere, how do we distinguish power from non-power? Is it meaningful to see all social relations as impregnated with a power dimension, or is that stretching the concept beyond the meaningful? On the one hand, I see the need to study how people in contemporary societies are affected and formed by anonymous structural forces, not least by commercial forces. On the other hand, we need to distinguish between powerful actors' direct use of their power and how living in a society that we are born into forms us.

There is no easy solution to this conceptual dilemma. Power analyses that ignore deep social trends and constraints can easily become too naïve, too individualist, or too conspiratorial. However, if we believe that powerful structural forces hold us, this may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we believe that no change is possible, this may become true, even if it was not necessarily so at the outset. Hence, the strongest proponents of structural deterministic power theories can be accused of being static essentialists, attaching too much power to exist-

ing social structures. Much has changed in Europe over the last twenty-five years, not least in Central and Eastern Europe. On a smaller scale, an example from Norway: Twenty-five years ago, the idea of female clergy was still quite controversial in the Church of Norway. Today, the number of female clergy is increasing rapidly, and only a very small minority is opposed to this development.

RELIGIOUS POWER AND THE POWER OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS

Up to now, my discussions of power analysis have been general. It is time to move more explicitly into the realm of religious power. What is religious power? Meerten Ter Borg (2009) makes a distinction between religious power and the power of religious actors. Analytically, I think this is fruitful. Based on our understanding of religion, we could define religious power first and foremost as power based on references to transcendent forces. This means that religious power is mainly the power to legitimize something, very often to declare that something is or is not God's will. Religious power is a normative and defining power. You may object to this claim that religious leaders through history and to this very day have made use of many other kinds of power, even including the use of violence. That is true, but if we choose to delimit religious power the way I just did, this simply means that religious leaders make use of several kinds of power in addition to religious power. Furthermore, actors without formal religious positions can exercise religious power. Bishops may have mundane power over the careers of pastors, and political leaders may invoke God and activate religious power as part of their repertoire.

I think this is useful to distinguish analytically between religious power and the power of religious actors. The disadvantage is the potential misunderstanding that religious people only make use of peaceful normative persuasion. Of course there can be several other kinds of power in religious or religio-political contexts. In effect, religious power is probably at its most efficient when it is intertwined with other kinds of power and interests, be they ethnicity, nationalism, class or gender tensions, or many other social forces. As students of religion, we should indeed be interested in such mixtures.

When I recommend distinguishing between religious power and the power of religious actors, I must admit that there are grey zones here; not only in the empirical world, but also analytically. Let me give one example from nineteenth-century Norwegian history. In the early 1800s, an ascetic and low-church movement appeared on the historical scene. The followers were called *haugianere* (Haugians). They were led by a sincere layman named Hans Nielsen Hauge, who was deeply inspired by Pietism and Mysticism. Hauge and the Haugians had a profound influence not only on Norway's religious history, but also on its economic history. Hauge's ethos could in many ways be used as an illustration of Max Weber's theory on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, and also of Weber's concept of inner-worldly asceticism (Weber 2001). Many of Hauge's followers established mills, shipyards, textile industries, and other kinds of industrial innovations, thus contributing considerably to the emergence of a modern capitalist industry in Norway². Many historians have pointed out that trust between fellow believers became immensely important in this phase of development. Hauge himself and other leaders in the movement made people with good ideas and people with capital come together and join forces to establish new business. Trust was especially important, as a formalized banking system had not been set up in Norway at the time. Can we use these events as examples of religious leaders using religious power, even if they dealt with mundane, economic matters? I think we can in this case. As mentioned, Lewis Coser (1976) listed access to networks as one of many sources of power. In this case, the Haugians' access to the network, and indeed the network itself, was based on trust between brethren and sisters in the faith. They activated religious capital in order to create mutual economic trust between people.

² For a sociological analysis of Haugianism and other social and religious movements in Norway in the nineteenth century, see Furseth 2002.

Hence, we can talk about a religiously based power through networking, as the religious community and the individual, but shared religious convictions were important prerequisites for economically relevant access and trust.

Allow me one additional comment on religion and power here: When religious leaders use their religious authority for secular political aims, or when political leaders sacralise their politics, we often hear critics telling us that these people are not really genuinely religious: they use—or rather, misuse—religion for political purposes. This may be true. But I have noticed that sometimes well-meaning and kind adherents of a soft and peace-loving religion are a bit too quick to deny that there is ‘real religion’ involved when religion is connected to actions and aims that they deem too violent. It is an empirical question (although a very difficult one to assess) as to what extent religion is a real motivational factor in some cases. But in principle we should be open to the possibilities that religion can sacralise violence as well as kindness, conflict as well as brotherhood. It should be added that religious power can support reform, revolution, and opposition as well as established systems and conservative practices.

RELIGIOUS POWER IN LIBERAL SOCIETIES: MAINLY NORMATIVE POWER

Even if religious power is often mixed up closely with other kinds of power, I think that in a liberal, pluralist society the power of religious leaders is increasingly normative rather than coercive power. There is an increase in religious individualization in many societies, where a part of the population grows up with little or no contact with religious organisations. Even inside such organisations, leaders do not have strong means to keep people in the flock. People have alternatives, and if leaders are conceived of as too strict or authoritarian, they risk that people withdraw or seek less demanding religious settings (Repstad 2003).

The American sociologist Amitai Etzioni has presented a fruitful typology of organisations, based on the kind of relationship existing between members and organisation (1964). Etzioni talks about normative, utilitarian, and coercive organisations. Prisons are good examples of coercive organisations. At the same time prisons (or parts of them) can also serve as an example of a utilitarian organisation; not for the prisoners, but for the people who work there. They may have some idealistic motivation in rehabilitating inmates, but the main reason they are there is probably economic self-interest: They simply need money to sustain life, and they get paid for working.

Of course there are also utilitarian elements in a religious organisation. Some people may work there for pay, some may have career ambitions, and so on. But the main relationship between organisations and members—as with many secular voluntary organisations—is based on common values and world-views. Leaders’ main means of motivation, as well as of power, is to convince members that it is meaningful to be part of the organisation. The members comply to the extent that they agree to, and are engaged in, the organisation’s mission.

This is a kind of pedagogical caricature. There may be spontaneous friendships in a prison. A closed religious sect may have strong sanctions against members, and one cannot ignore the fact that some religious leaders are quite interested in the rewards of this world. But religious organisations have at their disposal mainly normative, legitimizing, and reality-defining forms of power. These are relatively weak forms of power, especially in situations where members can go somewhere else, and if what the organisation has to offer has become of marginal importance in people’s lives.

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

It has been said that most sociology is a perennial discussion with Max Weber. I want to return to Weber, and to his typology of different kinds of authority, or *Herrschaft*, as he wrote in German (Weber 1980, 1993). By *Herrschaft*, he meant power that was accepted as legitimate by those who were subjected to power. It is worth noting that all three of his well-known types

of authority can be forms of religious power. Traditional authority can be strengthened by sacralising the tradition. Charismatic authority is obviously often based on a conviction that the charismatic leader has a special mission from God. This is also the case with institutionalized charismatic authority. The Pope has his office from God, through the notion of apostolic succession. It is tempting to elaborate a bit on Weber's third form of authority, the rational-legal type. I have in a sense modernised it in some of my Norwegian writings (Repstad 2002). I have distinguished between three types of rational-legal authority: bureaucratic, democratic, and professional (or expert) authority. A bureaucracy is often a relatively secular entity, but the rules governing it can in the last instance have religious legitimations. The same can be the case with democratic authority, even if modern democratic regimes often tend to have a rather secular political discourse. Finally, among experts with power, we also find religious experts; for example, experts on interpreting and reinterpreting religious texts.

Weber's interest in authority as legitimate power has been criticized for being too rationalist, even too pedantic. Pierre Bourdieu is a well-known critic of Weber here. Bourdieu's focus is more on the embodiment of cognitive and normative structures in a less-reflective and less-conscious way (Bourdieu 1989, 1991). According to Bourdieu structures of dominance often do not need explicit legitimations. Bourdieu's 1998 article, 'The economy of symbolic goods', includes a subchapter called 'The bishops' laughter'. One of several examples here from the realm of religion goes like this: A verger knows implicitly that it takes half an hour to decorate the altar in his church with flowers, and that it should be paid for with a certain sum according to contract. However, he prefers to talk about such work in terms of service, as part of a religious discourse. Making the economic dimension clear and explicit can lead to a fatal transformation of the logic in a universe based on a taboo against such explicitness. An important message from Bourdieu is that power is at its most efficient when it is conceived of as something other than power, and is taken for granted.³ Possible examples are when gender differences are seen as the result of nature's order or divine will, or when social inequality is seen as a natural result of education.

However, in defence of Weber (or at least in defence of the significance of legitimizing power), in a modern liberal democratic society, and not least in many religious settings, ethical considerations will often be relevant, and this increases the need to give reasons for exercising power. Besides, brute force has its limitations. You can threaten some people into silence and obedience, but hardly into enthusiasm, creative loyalty, and deeply-felt respect. A simplifying summary of the difference between Bourdieu's perspectives and those of Anthony Giddens would be that the latter (1984) paints a picture of a society where people reflect more, while Bourdieu stresses the embodied reproduction of power structures. A Solomonic verdict here is that both elements can be present, and their relative importance should be an issue for empirical investigations, not the topic of universal articles of faith.

FINALLY, SOME RULES OF THUMB

I have tried to identify quite a few conceptual and methodological challenges in the study of power in general, and especially in the study of religious power. All these somewhat problem-oriented and maybe even depressing remarks must not be used as arguments for skipping all empirical studies of processes involving power. They are meant more as a reminder of things we as researchers should be aware of in the course of our studies. There are no doubt power structures in societies where it can be difficult to point at specific actors exercising power. In the religious field, strong normative traditions can serve as examples of such power structures. However, as a rule of thumb, empirical researchers should at least take relevant actors as a

³ This does not, however, mean that Bourdieu embraces a simplistic reductionist analysis of power, stating that all church activities are in reality a mundane power game. He says that the religious field has two truths, one economic and one religious, and the second tends to deny or veil the first. Bourdieu tried to illustrate the complex interplay of the two by using a metaphor from the world of music: a chord. Preaching and marketing sound together, as do believers and consumers.

point of departure when studying power. As a practically oriented rounding off, here are some other thumb rules, some questions that often should be asked in such studies:

- Who decides in the relevant cases?
- Who decides the rules of the game?
- Whom do those making the decisions listen to?
- Who gains and who loses when looking at the outcome in relevant cases?
- Who decides what issues are considered issues?
- What arguments are being used in the debates? (In our context, what is the role of religious arguments, and what are these arguments?)
- Which arguments do all or most actors, including those who seem to lose more than they gain, see as legitimate?
- Are there arguments or other factors important to the outcome, which are significant without being made explicit in public?
- Are there actors with relevant resources who may have a passive influence on the outcome, based on others' general knowledge of their existence?
- Which assumptions are shared—explicitly or implicitly—by all or most of the actors?

I am sure readers can come up with suggestions to make the list even longer!

REFERENCES

- BOURDIEU, Pierre. 1989. 'Social Space and Symbolic Power'. *Sociological Theory* 7(1): 14-25.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. 1998. 'The economy of symbolic goods'. In Pierre Bourdieu: *Practical Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 92-123.
- BRUCE, Steve and Steven Yearley. 2006. 'Power'. In *The Sage Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Steve Bruce and Steven Yearley, 241. London: Sage.
- COLEMAN, James S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press.
- COSER, Lewis. 1976. 'The notion of power: theoretical developments.' In *Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings*, 4th ed. edited by Lewis Coser and Bernard Rosenberg. New York: Macmillan.
- DAHL, Robert A. 1984. *Modern Political Analysis*, 4th ed., Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- ETZIONI, Amitai. 1964. *Modern Organisations*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- FURSETH, Inger 2002. *A Comparative Study of Social and Religious Movements in Norway 1780s-1905*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- FURSETH, Inger and Pål Repstad. 2006. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* edited by Gordon, Colin, New York: Pantheon Books.
- GIDDENS, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- GULBRANDSEN, Trygve et al. 2002. *Norske makteliter [Norwegian Power Elites]*, Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- LUKES, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*, London: Macmillan.
- PARSONS, Talcott. 1986. 'Power and the Social System'. In *Power: Readings in Social and Political Theory* edited by Steven Lukes, 94-143. Oxford: Blackwell.
- REPSTAD, Pål. 2002. *Dype, stille, sterke, milde. Religiøs makt i dagens Norge [Deep, silent, strong, mild. Religious power in contemporary Norway]*, Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.

- REPSTAD, Pål. 2003. 'The powerlessness of power in a pluralist society'. *Social Compass* 50(2), 161-173.
- REPSTAD, Pål. 2004. 'Radikal kirkeelite: tegn på makt eller avmakt?' [A Radical Church Elite: an Indication of Power or Powerlessness?] In *Mellom prinsipper og pragmatisme [Between Principles and Pragmatism]* edited by Hans Stifoss-Hansen and Inger Furseth, 61-74. Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press.
- TER BORG, Meerten B. 2009. 'Religion and Power'. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* edited by Peter Clarke, 194-209. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WEBER, Max. 1980. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr.
- WEBER, Max. 1993. *The Sociology of Religion*. Introduction by Talcott Parsons, with a new foreword by Ann Swidler, Boston: Beacon Press.
- WEBER, Max 2001. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge.