

Power dynamics between violence and justice.

Practical theological reflections

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a dynamic psycho-social model of power relations, consisting of structural and strategic elements. Structural elements of power relations are power position and power means. Strategic elements are power execution and power motives. These elements constitute dynamically the power transaction in a relation between persons, connected to the wider social network. The model assists in understanding power relations in situations of violence, effects of intervention, and the interaction to power relations with God. Justice and empowerment serve as critical and normative notions in search of more salutary religious and theological approaches to power and intervention.

1. THE CONCEPT OF POWER

The concept of power is not alien to theology. In many ways, theologians and historians of religion have shown how power and divinity were closely related, sometimes almost synonyms. The notion of 'God Almighty' served in many religions and Christian denominations as something like a shibboleth of orthodoxy. Others have shown how the structure of the church is determined by power and hierarchy.¹ One may doubt the chances of such notions to survive the present or near future. The historic developments of radicalized democracy in religion have found a climax in our (post-)modern days. As Don Cupitt points out, everyday language shows that ours is a time of realized eschatology, in which God is all and in all.² The world, then, is what we make of it, and no power is

¹ 'Whatever else their congregants believe them to be, sociologically churches are hierarchies of unequal power'. SHUPE, Anson, 1998. 'Introduction. The dynamics of clergy malfeasance' in: SHUPE, Anson (ed), *Wolves in the fold. Religious leadership and abuses of power*. New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers University Press, p. 2; POLING, James N., 1996. *Deliver us from evil. Resisting racial and gender oppression*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press; BEASLEY-MURRAY, Paul, 1998, *Power for God's sake. Power and abuse in the local church*. Carlisle (UK), Paternoster.

² CUPITT, Don, 2000. *Kingdom come in everyday speech*. London, SPCK.

accepted or postulated above us. At the same time, power remains an undeniable force in human conduct, most apparent perhaps in violent behavior, but also in the enforcement of peace and justice, both at the level of individuals and at the level of nations. For many, a perennial power system with accompanying legitimation is morally and psychologically unacceptable. Therefore, we focus on the *dynamics* of power in their relational and religious shapes. How is this power to be conceived, analyzed, and interpreted? What are the implications for dealing with violence and justice? How does this relate to the religious/theological domain? These questions will guide us in this article.

The dynamic concept of power can be understood as the capacity to determine parts of someone else's behavior, including cognition and emotions.³ It may be defined more abstractly in a social exchange perspective as 'the level of potential cost that an actor can impose on another'.⁴ Social exchange theories take their starting point in the observation that much of what we need and value in life can only be obtained from others. Basic elements of a theory are the actors behaving according to their intentions, the resources available, the structures of exchange, and the transactions of exchange. The value of a social exchange perspective for our discussion is the focus on power and on actual interaction between human actors, rather than on stable positions and structures. In this perspective, important distinctions are offered for an analysis of power dynamics. Central to social exchange theories is the understanding that the mutual dependence of actors is the structural condition for both social exchange and power. Even when one might argue that power precedes dependence as much as it follows it,⁵ the power of one person over another equals the dependence of the second on the first. With regard to power, one can distinguish reward power and punishment (or coercive) power, structural power positions and strategic power use, average power in a relation and power imbalance between the parties.

There are several implications of the understanding that power rests on, and equals dependence.⁶ First, power is connected to a specific relation, not to persons. In an abstract way, there are no powerful or powerless persons, but only relations in which one has power over the other. Second, power is a potential, connected to an actor's position in a structure of dependence relations. Whether or not this power is executed is another issue. Third, the total amount of power in a relation is not fixed. Increase in one actor's power does not imply decrease in the other's power. This insight is crucial for understanding the concept of empowerment. Fourth, two persons may have multiplex relations with varying

³ GANZEVOORT, R. Ruard et Alexander L. VEERMAN, 2000. *Geschonden lichaam. Pastorale gids voor gemeenten die geconfronteerd worden met seksueel geweld*. [Violated body. Pastoral guide for communities confronted with sexual violence]. Zoetermeer (The Netherlands), Boekencentrum, p. 40.

⁴ MOLM, Linda D., *Coercive power in social exchange*. Cambridge (UK), University Press, 1997, p. 282.

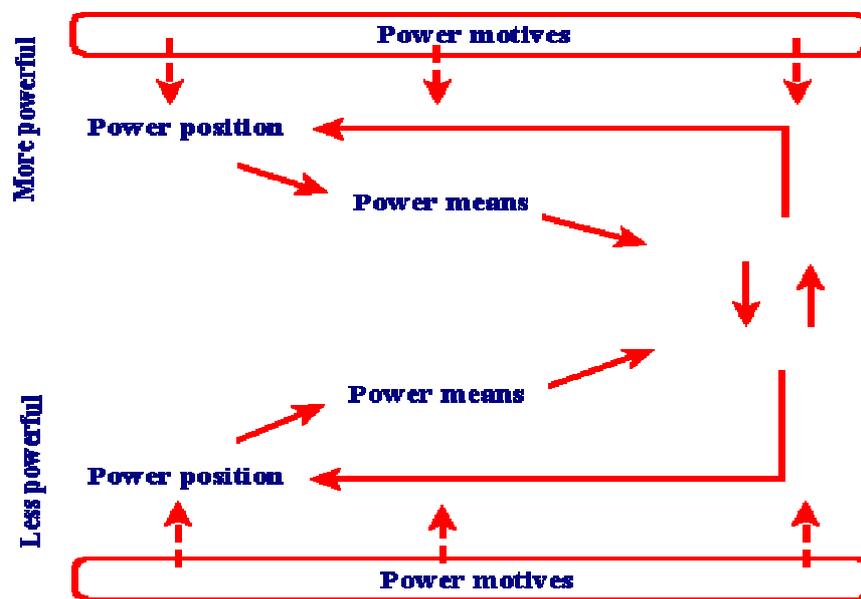
⁵ "Through control over vital resources [...] a group (such as the state, or a person) creates dependency on itself". Frank R. VIVELLO, *Power and its consequences. A rational perspective*. Lanham (Md), University Press of America, 1998, p. 39.

⁶ The first three are depicted in MOLM, Linda D., *Coercive power in social exchange*. Cambridge (UK), University Press, 1997, p. 30.

power balances. Although one could calculate a general power imbalance between two persons, the actual power imbalances between them may be far more important for the process of exchanges.

For our analysis, we turn to a model inspired by these theories. This model integrates structural and strategic dimensions of power by distinguishing four elements: power position, power means, power execution, and power motives. Their interrelations are depicted in figure 1.⁷ We will describe these elements and their appearance in situations of violence and justice.

FIGURE 1. *Structural and strategic elements in power dynamics*



1.1. Power position

Power position refers to the structural dimension. Each person occupies a certain position in the social networks. This position is in part determined by a series of demographic factors like race, sex, class, age, education, profession, and income. Dependent upon specific (sub-)cultural standards, one's determinants in each of these factors decrease or increase one's power position. For example, in many cultural settings the white male university professor has a great advantage in power position compared to the black female cleaning person.

In analyzing power relations between two (or more) persons, we have to take into account the wider range of relations within the social networks that legitimate or critique these power relations. Vivelo (1998, 41) describes authority as 'the

⁷ This model has been developed by the present author, inspired (amongst others) by KOOPMAN-IWEMA, A.M., *Macht, motivatie, medezeggenschap*. Assen (The Netherlands), Van Gorcum and comp., 1980.

legitimation of power: the socially recognized "right" to exert control'. Power position then has to do with social status. In our century we can discover a marked change in the nature of social status.⁸ In earlier times, social status was primarily ascribed, granted someone because (s)he was born or appointed in a specific position. Thus, the minister, the teacher, the officer were legitimated in their power, regardless of their performance or personal merits. Nowadays, social status is primarily achieved, based on one's previous functioning. One must gain others' respect and recognition and earn the right to exert control. This change has contributed to more dynamic power relations, as we tried to incorporate in our model. One's power position in relation to someone else is not stable. It may get stronger or weaker, dependent on factors external to this power relation, and on the outcomes of previous exchanges. This may influence the total amount of power in the relation, and the imbalance between the actors.

In situations of violence, the perpetrator is by definition the more powerful. Less or equally powerful persons lack the capacity to determine parts of someone else's behavior. However, this power advantage may be partial. One may occupy a position of high power, and still be victimized. An example may be found in diplomats taken hostage. Even then, the perpetrator needs to identify or create a situation where (s)he can exert control, and only within that situation the power imbalance endures. This example shows that Vivello's economic and politicological description of authority as the social recognized right needs some adaptation when applied to situations of interpersonal violence. Violence contradicts social recognition. It is precisely because of the lack of social recognition that an act is named violence. However, power abuse in violence is deeply grounded in our social systems. Following others, Poling (1996, 8) states: "The matrix of domination is a system of attitudes, behaviors and assumptions that objectifies human persons on the basis of socially constructed categories such as race, gender, class, etc., and that has the power to deny autonomy, access to resources and self-determination to those persons, while maintaining the values of the dominant society as the norm by which all else will be measured'.

Quite often, especially in domestic and sexual violence, power positions are indeed socially vindicated, making it difficult for victims to be acknowledged as victims of violence. For the bystander, to name the more powerful a perpetrator and his / her acts 'violence' would mean to repudiate the recognition formerly granted, and therefore to acknowledge the complicity in creating the social order that facilitated the acts.⁹ Given the fact that most perpetrators are known and trusted by the victim, we can assume that both ascribed and achieved tendencies contribute to the continuation of power positions.

⁸ This change has been described in terms of 'ascribed' versus 'achieved' or 'attained' versus 'granted'. See H.M. JOHNSON, *Sociology. A systematic introduction*. New-York, Harcourt, 1960; SARBIN, T.R. et K.E. SCHEIBE, 1983, 'A model of social identity' in: SARBIN, T.R. & K.E. SCHEIBE (ed), *Studies in social identity*, New-York, 1983.

⁹ GUDORF, C.E., 1992. *Victimization. Examining Christian complicity*. Philadelphia, Trinity Press.

1.2. Power means

Power means are in part derived from one's power position, and in part from capacities of the person like physical or verbal preponderance. They include the ability to reward and punish, or, more generally, the control over resources the other values. These resources may be material, emotional, social, and so on. Power means, then, are the complements of the dependencies of the less powerful. A person becomes more powerful in a relation to the degree that the other is more dependent on him or her for access to these resources. Two mechanisms can be distinguished to diminish this power imbalance. One is the decrease of the less powerful's dependence of these resources. The other is the decrease of the more powerful's control.

In situations of sexual violence, often a combination of power means is present. Only in a minority of cases we find a single means power advantage. The classic bogey of random rape by the stranger in the woods is an example, in which only physical power means are used. However, probably more than 80 percent of all cases of sexual violence occur within existing relations, in which the perpetrator disposes of a variety of power means. The example of clergy sexual violence is a case in point. Ministers and priests may not have the same power position they once had, there is a clear power advantage when compared to potential victims. Typical clergy use of power means is found in their verbal and relational capacities, notably in comparison with vulnerable parishioners.¹⁰ Furthermore, they 'control' religious resources, either symbolically as in their right to speak the word of God and to offer absolution, or literally as in their right to administer holy communion. The possibilities of clergy to influence the social context and the formal system of the church by far exceed those of the potential victim.

We have stated that the less powerful also has power means to his or her avail. One of the most important may be the possible disclosure of the offender's behavior. Another is the fact that the offender is dependent on the victim for the gratification of his or her needs (e.g., intimacy or sexual contact). This dependence is equivalent, we noted, to power on the side of the victim. Overpowering as the offender may be, theoretically the victim has the power to deprive the offender of valued resources. Often, the victim is not in a position to use these power means because (s)he depends on the offender for other resources.

1.3. Power execution

Power execution is the actual use of power position and power means in specific transactions. Whereas position and means are structural elements of the power relation, power execution is a strategic element. Both subtle and blatant forms of power execution can be found. The last are exemplified by physical violence and threats, the first by manipulation and lure. Often an offender will use both forms alternately, both rewarding and punishing the (intended) victim in a seemingly

¹⁰ DOEHRING, Carrie, *Taking care. Monitoring power dynamics and relational boundaries in pastoral care and counseling*. Nashville, Abingdon, 1995.

random manner.¹¹ This randomness threatens the (intended) victim's understanding and control over the situation and increases his or her dependence. Power execution as a strategic element has been analyzed in terms of perpetrator's stratagems.¹² In cases of sexual violence, they often consist of long term planning, internal balancing of desires, risks, and barriers, creating a relation of dependence, isolating the intended victim from his or her social network and resources, redefining the relation and possible sexual acts, and so on.

Power execution on the side of the (intended) victim can be termed resistance. As a matter of fact, according to James Poling (1996, xiv), evil and resistance should be understood in a dialectic way. The one can only be identified in relation to the other. Poling defines evil as 'the abuse of power in personal, social, and religious forms that destroys bodies and spirits. Evil is an abuse of power because the power of life comes from God, and all power should be used for good. Whenever power is used to destroy the bodies and spirits of God's creation, there is evil'. He describes resistance to evil as '... a form of liberated and critical consciousness that enables persons or groups to stand against evil in silence, language and action'.

The outcome of strategic power execution reinforces or undermines the power positions of the persons involved. Effective power execution in a relation contributes to a stronger position. Shown ability and willingness to employ power means available to a person likewise influences the power relation. When previous power exchanges have been effective for a person, the actual execution of power means becomes less needed, because the other will be convinced of the power potential.

In our model, strategic and structural elements influence one another. The power structure of position and means provides the conditions for strategic power execution, whilst the latter influences the power positions and means that form the starting point for future exchanges. The perpetrator's stratagem, as referred to earlier, consists of a number of these exchanges, each of them intended to strengthen the perpetrator's position and to weaken the position of the intended victim. The perpetrator aims at undermining the other's social network and resources, and enhancing his or her dependence. Often the victim's trust in her or his own judgment is invalidated consistently by the offender. This means that the victim becomes even more dependent, not only for reward and punishment, but even for defining what could be understood as reward or punishment.

1.4. Power motives

Power motives can be understood as the driving forces behind power positions, means, and execution. Without power motives, neither structural nor strategic elements will be employed in social exchanges. Several power motives can be distinguished. First, power can be a means to an end: the acquisition of valued

¹¹ HERMAN, Judith L., *Trauma and recovery*. New York, Basic Books, 1992.

¹² BORST, J.C., *Gij zijt die man. Een onderzoek naar de pastorale zorg voor incestdaders*. [Thou art that man. An inquiry into pastoral care for perpetrators of incest], Leiden (The Netherlands), Groen, 1995.

resources. In cases of sexual violence, power can be used to obtain sexual gratification. In other cases it may serve to accumulate material goods, status, or something else. The (intended) victim may resort to power means and execution to safeguard him- or herself against the perceived threats. Bystanders, both in the role of protector and judge, may utilize power to do justice. Obviously, these processes are akin to economic life, where social exchange theories have their origin.

Second, power can be a goal in itself. To be precise: it may serve no other goal *within this relation*. Usually, this kind of power motive is determined by the felt need to compensate something that is missing in other relations. Some execute power to neutralize the experiences of powerlessness, prevalent in other relations. It may seem, then, that the surplus in one relation restores a subjective power position that was threatened in another relation. This homeostatic view seems useful for a partial explanation why some victims may become perpetrators.

However, a third kind of power motives can be identified that - if accepted as valid - suggests a slightly different interpretation. The execution of power can be demanded or at least validated by the social environment. The first and second type of power motives could be described as psychological forces, more or less rationally contributing to the individual's aspirations. This third type of power motives points to the social-ecological origin of such motives.¹³ Why - we may ask - is it that in certain cultural settings specific motives are considered acceptable? The need to compensate experiences of powerlessness is not universal. Indeed, if we include gender in our analysis, we may find that this motive of compensation is far more prevalent with men than it is with women. Put starkly, experiences of powerlessness may be a radical affirmation of cultural gender messages for women, and an equally radical abnegation of cultural gender messages for men. If this be true, one would expect a power motive of compensation to be socially and culturally validated for men, but not for women.¹⁴

2. POWER, VIOLENCE, AND JUSTICE

In our portrayal of the elements of power exchanges, we have repeatedly used situations of (sexual) violence as examples to illustrate the abstract components of the theory. At this point, we will try to show how this theory can serve to identify situations of violence, and can help determine just actions. Obviously, this presupposes a normative stance, which is based on the principle that it is wrong to use power at the expense of others.

If this principle is accepted, we may ask how the theory outlined above identifies the use of power at the expense of others, and how justice can be done. These questions become acute when we are confronted with for example (claims of)

¹³ Frank R. VIVELLO, *Power and its consequences. A rational perspective*. Lanham (Md), University Press of America, 1998, p. 70.

¹⁴ See also HARRIS, Ian M., *Messages men bear. Constructing masculinities*. Bristol (Pa), Taylor & Francis, 1995.

sexual violence. First, then, we may seek to understand the particular relation between the (alleged) offender and the supposed victim. Their respective power positions and means, and cues of power execution and motives can be charted. In some cases power execution will be prominent and power position ambiguous. In other cases articulate power positions will be found and almost imperceptible power execution.

Second, following this analysis, we focus again on the (supposed) victim's account. Now the question arises whether the power exchange has strengthened or weakened her or his power position. In our theory, we have related this power position to the control over or access to valued resources. If the power exchange has resulted in decreased control or access, it may be defined as 'at the expense of others'. This second step is essential, because power in and by itself does not equal violence or evil. We have also noted that the total amount of power in a relation is not fixed. Increase in one actor's power does not imply decrease in the other's power. The question then can be formulated whether power is used over others, with others, or for others. The first can be found in hierarchical and violent structures, the second in communal networks, and the third in processes of justice and empowerment.

Third, we may ask what actions can serve to do justice. To assess possible actions and their consequences, we will have to look at power positions, means, and execution, while taking into account the power motives of those involved. Careful analysis of a situation may lead to an intervention in power positions, offer alternative power means, and so on. It is important to note, however, that the intervening person or institution enters into power relations with both victim and perpetrator. The analysis therefore needs to include the intervener's power position, means, motives, and execution in relation to both.

The effect of this intervention may even be counterproductive. Examples are found at all levels of power and conflict. NATO attacks on Serbian targets, trying to force Milosevich to adopt a more democratic stance, led to an increase in his suppressive actions. Likewise, ministers may confront alleged perpetrators of domestic sexual violence with the noblest of motives, and discover later on that their action resulted in intensified threat or violence. One way of understanding this is found in the analysis of the various power relations operative. The intervener with a higher power position, valued power means, and honorable motives executes power directed to an offender. This may strengthen the offender's power motives, whilst threatening his or her power position. To solve this tension, the offender can try to secure his or her position by persistent and intensified power execution. The victims of this offender then are punished for their breaking the silence and their call for help, or used as objects of manipulating the intervener.

The relation between the intervener and the victim is still in other ways complicated. Even in cases of effective intervention, the message conveyed to the victim is one of external powers. Both offender and intervener act from a high

position of power toward the victim, extensive power means, and effective power execution. Obviously, their motives and effect may differ, but many interventions result not in restored, but in further hampered power potentials for the victim. It is here that empowerment becomes a crucial notion.

Empowerment can be described as the processes in which less powerful persons are facilitated to strengthen their power position, develop power means, and enhance effective power execution, driven by power motives of autonomy, connectedness, and justice. Empowerment strategies aim at providing what is needed so that less powerful persons become able to avert threats. Instead of attacking the offender, empowerment seeks to support and strengthen the victim. Three levels of empowerment outcome can be distinguished. The first is survival. When nothing else is feasible, this level is warranted in that it prevents the annihilation of the victim's capacities.¹⁵ The second level is inner change. When the outer situation cannot (yet) be altered, the victim may come to an altered state of consciousness that is liberated from intrusive messages of the offender.¹⁶ The third level is revolution, in which the outer situation and the accompanying power structures themselves are changed.¹⁷ These levels are intrinsically related.¹⁸ Obviously, if possible, the higher levels are to be commended. However, without attention for survival and inner change, revolution will not only fail; it may even further damage the victim. An example is found in victims of sexual violence that feel obliged to press charges, and suffer immensely in the judicial process.

3. POWER, RELIGION, AND THEOLOGY

In the network of power relations, religion can play an important role. In fact, every aspect mentioned above can be applied to the religious domain. We already noted the control over religious resources in cases of clergy sexual violence. We could also point to the religious legitimation of power positions, for example in the message of obedience, creating loyalty in victims and bystanders that prohibits them from offering resistance.

It seems useful to focus on the power relation between God and humans and the interaction of this power relation with other relations. In the relational grid of human individuals and groups, both real and imaginary others interact and are positioned by the complex web of relations. As Ricoeur notes: "The self is constituted and defined by its position as respondent to propositions of meaning

¹⁵ POLING, James N., *Deliver us from evil. Resisting racial and gender oppression*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 105.

¹⁶ HILL COLLINS, 1990, p. 91-114; POLING, 1996, p. 106-107.

¹⁷ HILL COLLINS, 1990, p.113.

¹⁸ In another discussion, Liz KELLY, Sheila BURTON, and Linda REGAN, 'Beyond victim or survivor. Sexual violence, identity and feminist theory and practice', in: ADKINS, Lisa and Vicky MERCHANT (éd), *Sexualizing the social. Power and the organization of sexuality*. London, MacMillan, 1996, p. 77-101, reject the dichotomy or chronological order of identities like 'victim' and 'survivor', and show how both concepts carry significant and problematic connotations.

issuing from the symbolic network'.¹⁹ In this relational and symbolic network, God functions and is perceived as a participant, comparable to other participants.²⁰ One important difference may be that, from a scientific point of view, Gods actions are mediated through human actions, texts, and rituals.

3.1. God - human power relations

Our aim now is to investigate the God - human power relation in situations of violence and justice. Obviously, we will not be able to provide an encompassing analysis. For each religious individual and community specific analyses are needed, because of the particularities of every power relation. In a sense, God is different to each, and the power relation between a person and God will take shape according to the human power position, means, execution, and motives, and the perception of God's power position, means, execution, and motives. Still, some global remarks can be made, based on the model outlined above, and inviting readers to consider the specifics of their own and other's power relation with God.

Our global remarks take their starting point in religious life of victims of sexual violence. For many of them, God has been mediated in a religious narrative framework of sovereignty, judgment, and unconditioned agency. His²¹ transcendent divinity cannot be made dependent on human beings, and even if He responds to prayer, it is always within the choice of His freedom if He lets himself be determined by humans.²² God - as they have come to know Him - is in a position of absolute power. In the power relation between God and humans, this means that humans are in a position of absolute dependence and powerlessness.

Likewise, God's power means are unlimited. If power is indeed understood as the capacity to determine parts of someone else's behavior, including cognition and emotions, then God disposes of endless power means. Not only does He control all the resources valued by the religious individual - intimacy, comfort, eternal rewards, and so on -, He is also determining our heart and soul through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In radicalized Reformation theologies this has led to an elaborate view of predestination, in which every human contribution to the relation with God is denied or reinterpreted as God's work. With unlimited power position and means on God's side, power execution become unidirectional. The

¹⁹ (Note missing in original) RICOEUR, P., 'The summoned subject in the school of the narratives of the prophetic vocation' dans RICOEUR P, *Figuring the sacred. Religion, narrative, and imagination*. Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995, pp. 263-275.

²⁰ This approach of the question of God avoids ontological discussions and allows for theological and social scientific investigations into the relations between God and humans. See for example SUNDEN, Hjalmar, *Die Religion und die Rollen* [Religion and roles] Berlin, Töpelmann, 1966, and POLLNER, Melvin, 1989, 'Divine relations, social relations and well-being' *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30, p. 92-104.

²¹ In this line of thought, God is usually conceived as masculine.

²² See a discussion on this point in: TANNER, Kathryn E., *God and creation in Christian theology. Tyranny or empowerment*. Oxford (UK), Basil Blackwell, 1998, p. 96 vv.

human individual has little or nothing to contribute, and resistance against God is subject to condemnation.

Negative and caricatured as this picture seems, it may well be the dominant God - human power relation as mediated in many Christian denominations. It seems to be a major God image that victims of violence and their advocates address in their resistance. Another important image is found in the suffering of Christ. Whereas the almighty God is not an object of identification, but instead reinforces powerlessness, the suffering Christ is so, because He substitutes humans in redemption. However, this often implies a glorification of suffering and victimization.²³

3.2 God, justice, and empowerment

Dominant messages concerning God and His power relation with humans thus are questionable when it comes to their impact on victimized persons. They may even reinforce the meanings and effects of violence. Both violence and dominant God messages undermine victims' power positions, means, and execution. Both force the victim in the direction of surrender and loyalty. Having said that, we should be clear that in the Bible and in most Christian traditions strong tendencies are found that resist violence and intend to bring justice. For that reason, some have argued adamantly that it is not the infallible Christian message, but fallible and indeed sinful people misusing the message. True as that may be, this argument sustains the problematic God - human power relation earlier described. In trying to defend the message (and God), humans are blamed.

As in the case of human intervention, we need a more profound analysis of how messages of God's power interact with offender - victim power relations. This should include the vulnerability of religious texts to be manipulated in such a way that victims cannot resort to potentially liberating religious elements. The connection of divine power and divine justice is a case in point. The expectation of God bringing justice can be meaningful for persons suffering injustice and violence. Frequently, however, this is framed in terms of sin and forgiveness or absolution. In mainstream Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism, both sin and forgiveness are understood as functioning primarily in the relation between God and the sinner. The victim of these sins becomes almost invisible. This effects in redemption for the offender and annihilation of the victim.

Parallel to efforts to reshape our legal systems in terms of restorative justice,²⁴ focusing on restorative acts toward the victim, rather than toward the state, a reinterpretation of biblical and religious sources is needed. We are in need of an understanding of God's justice and power that is empowering. Liberation theologies, based in feminism, black consciousness, and gay and lesbian

²³ CARLSON BROWN, Joanne and Rebecca PARKER, 'For God so loved the world' dans ADAMS, Carol J. et Marie M. FORTUNE (eds.), *Violence against women and children. A christian theological sourcebook*. New York, Continuum, 1995, p. 36-59.

²⁴ MACKEY, Virginia, *Restorative justice. Toward non-violence*. Louisville (Ky), Presbyterian Criminal Justice program, 1997.

communities, may contribute to this understanding. A number of liberating narratives can be found, varying from the Exodus account to prophets addressing the powerful, and Jesus' acts of exorcism.

The concept of empowerment by God has to mitigate the juxtaposition of God and humans. Instead of an implicit theology that the sovereign power of God does not allow for dependence or for human power, we need theologies of collaborative power, in which God executes Her²⁵ power to facilitate human power, especially for the less powerful. The notion of empowerment includes the moral assumption that destructive power is evil.

To do justice, then, we have to give hermeneutic and moral priority to the victimized.²⁶ The first task of theologians in this respect is to enhance awareness of the effects of their abstract reasoning about God's power on power relations between humans. The second task is to assist the Christian community in construing and reconstruing images and messages of God that are empowering, making it possible for both victims and offenders to live in a salutary relation with God: just, free, and truly human.

²⁵ This concept of power is predominantly feminine. See HAMPSON, D., 'On power and gender', in: THATCHER, A & E. STUART (eds) *Christian perspectives on sexuality and gender*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996.

²⁶ POLING, James N., *Deliver us from evil. Resisting racial and gender oppression*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 103.