



# Jesus in the eShop

## A Christian Perspective on Power in the Digital

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*By starting out with Hannah Arendts concept of power this paper follows Anthony Giddens and his attempt to take up on Weber's and Parsons' ideas. With the gained understanding of power the paper examines the relationship between power and digitalization. Especially the internet as an place of equal opportunity and asymmetric power is taken into account. The author then observes a threefold challenge to (Christian) religion by the power structures resulting from digital capitalism.*

### 1. Taking Charge of the Temple

Considering the biblical story about Jesus' expelling merchants and money changers from the temple found in Mk 11,15-19 par, we can discern at least three different interpretations leading to three different stories. While current exegesis teaches us, that any interpretation that charges Jesus with the intention of an abrogation of the temple or a breach with a jewish identity should be understood an antijudaistic myth, as Jesus has not tried to 'cleanse' but probably prophetically claimed the temple<sup>1</sup>, there still might be a story of domination, of marketization or of alienation. The story of domination aims at the prophetic critique of the values of a corrupt leadership by the ruling classes cooperating with the Roman occupants; the story of marketization stresses the view

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<sup>1</sup> Tiwald 2017: 464.

of the temple as a place of dealing in money instead of God's grace and power, the story of alienation looks at the temple as a place of the reversal of God's good order, something to be set right in God's kingdom.

No matter which story you prefer, each is a story of power. Either of a power embedded in relationships, or of a power situated in the controlling of resources or of a power present in a images of order. In a prophetic symbolic act Jesus himself claimed and wielded power - which wasn't taken lightly by the powers that were. The temple is, in all of these stories, a symbol of a good, albeit perverted, order, it is, in symbol and in social reality, a nexus of power, a nerve center of the elites, as an exegete puts it.<sup>2</sup>

To state it bluntly: in a religious perspective, the temple might not be the worst simile for today's digital communication and information networks, platforms and virtual realities, as they are nexus of power, nerve centers not only of elites. Structuring channels of global communication means power, as the transfer of money, knowledge and the forming of behaviour is determined by such channels and the technical means we use to build and use them. Like the temples of old, those channels are man-made and serve technical as well as symbolic social functions, as hubs of distribution, but also, to many, point to a reality beyond. Thus, claiming the temple is never just harmless, as Jesus of Nazareth discovered at his cost.

Of course, a simile only covers so much ground. For that reason, I will concentrate on platforms. Many phenomena will not be treated: I'll not talk about blockchain or KI, I will not go into the internet of things or the military uses of digital instruments, even though all those things come into play when we talk about power in the digital world. What I will do, however, is try to explain how I use the term power, how digitization and power are connected and what religion may have to do with the unfolding of power in the digital world.

## 2. Power and Domination: Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, Anthony Giddens

First of all, I'd like to distinguish two different concepts of power in order to clarify in which way I make use of the term.

A first definition is the famous agonistic one coined by sociologist Max Weber: He defines 'power' as the ability to enforce one's will even against resistance.<sup>3</sup> Even though this usage of the concept is close to many everyday uses, it seems flawed for three rea-

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<sup>2</sup> Tiwald 2017: 464.

<sup>3</sup> Weber 1922: 28.

sons. First of all, it situates power in contexts close to some type of domination and thereby unduly narrows down its scope, while we may understand power as the basic ability ‘to make a difference’<sup>4</sup>; in individuals it may show itself as self-efficacy<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, it does not take mediated action into account – but social structure is more often than not embedded in technologies, practices or codified rules (like laws), and even though such practices may go back to some human action, it may be hardly identifiable after time as such structures are often reproduced, modified or abolished in everyday practice without visible intention directed at the influence of such structures. Thirdly, and connected to the first counterargument, it gives rise to the confusion of power with force, while the most sustainable use of power is the one that does not need to rely on force or violence.

For that reason, rather in accordance with Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas I will start out from Hannah Arendt’s concept of power. Arendt defines power as the ability to communicatively cooperate together with others in order to make a difference.<sup>6</sup> Even though the teleology stressed in Weber and Parsons’ concepts of power, the ability to reach a certain goal, is less important here, it is by no means absent, as the ability to conceptualize goals is in itself an aspect of power dependent on social and cultural interaction over time.<sup>7</sup> Thus understood, power has its roots in cooperative action that makes a difference. Teleology is gradual, and thus, even if a certain goal is not reached and consequences are unintended we may still argue that power has been exerted.

Regarding the means used to exert power, the concepts of allocative and authoritative resources developed by Anthony Giddens in his attempt to take up on Weber’s and Parsons’ ideas from an Arendtian point of view are, to my mind, plausible. This is especially relevant as such resources and their effects can be conceptualized in a praxeologic perspective, in which Bourdieu’s<sup>8</sup> concepts of habitus and social, cultural and economic capital can be used to understand exertion and transitions of power. To give an example: once a certain structuration mode of cultural elements – for instance the establishment of an alleged connection of skin colour and social value – has been incorporated into a certain habitus, it continues to exert power as long as agents reproduce that connection in – consciously or unconsciously – ‘seeing’ people of different

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<sup>4</sup> Giddens 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Bandura 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt 1970: 45.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu 1972; Bourdieu 1983.

colours differently. As in the example, this is especially bitter as And of course, the conscious reversal of such discriminating attitudes and modes of ‘seeing’ may be especially bitter as those discriminated against carry that habitus themselves. And when those modes of ‘seeing’ or ‘watching’ permeate the algorithms of search engines, then the search for ‘black women’ will result in turning out imagery loaded with sexist and racist stereotypes, as Safya Noble<sup>9</sup> has shown.

### 3. Digitization and Power

In the world of digital informations- and communications technologies (ICT), social media and the communication platforms and channels that go along with them, allocative and authoritative resources play out in different ways. Authoritative resources appear in the form of what I would call framing power, allocative resources play out in a privatization of communication channels and proprietary markets. Of course, such resources are distributed unevenly, there are long-standing inequalities playing out but also an early-starter dividend. And contrary to the promise attributed in early times by well-meaning activists to digital communication and the internet as a space of equal opportunity and equity, it is a part of the general public – which may be understood as a fragmented space of articulation as well as an arena of asymmetric power struggles<sup>10</sup> – in which asymmetric power plays an especially important role.

#### 3.1 Framing Power and Digitization (Authoritative Ressources)

Theologians and outspoken religious virtuosos of all kinds usually know a lot about framing power – I refer to my Christian tradition for some non-digital examples. When hellenistic Jews and proselytes following the Nazarene used the greek term of ‘kyrios’ to refer to Jesus, it was hard to overlook that this was an imperial title reserved for royalty or even the Roman emperor and thus an act of subversion that was plausible to many adherents of this new underclass religion. When, on the other hand, priests and ministers of the Christian church in times of its legalization and imperial acceptance under Constantine and Theodosius were invested in the robes of imperial officials and the imperial organ became the liturgical musical instrument of choice, that also framed reality: messing with the church meant messing with the empire whose leaders chose to make this religion the symbol of imperial unity. When, in Reformation times, the new printing technology gave rise to the mass production

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<sup>9</sup> Noble 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Meireis 2020.

and distribution of affordable illuminated leaflets, making literary products an everyday commodity and literacy an attractive ability, the faithful became less dependent on authoritative word of mouth. When, to give a last example, Martin Luther King quoted Amos' prophetic call for justice and righteousness in support of the claims of the civil rights' movement to equal rights and freedom from oppression for African Americans, he framed political reality in invoking divine support and merging the civil religious ideology along which the US national community was imagined with a civil liberation and equality agenda, thus adding a new twist to the story of US identity - supported, of course, by large numbers of black and white citizens.

As in the analogous examples given, in the digital world, framing has a technological, a habitual, and a narrative dimension to it. All three overlap and interact.

In a technological vein, the use we make of the instruments the information and communication technologies (ICT) provide also changes the ways in which we perceive the world.<sup>11</sup> Of course, given the plurality of services and the renewal rate of fashionable services, there is always more than one choice and an improvement of certain skills, so we are not dealing in conspiracy theories of histories of decline. Using WhatsApp may result in an increase in communication and people we reach out to as well as in the skills necessary to profit from the service, but also in a contact barrier regarding those who do not subscribe to that service. As GPS navigation systems show, finding your way in unknown terrain loses a lot of its scare so that geographical distances shrink even further, but skills in map-reading and general awareness of geographical surroundings may decline due to the irony of automation.<sup>12</sup> And of course power is involved as those who technically structure the services influence the ways of changing perception by framing it in novel ways.

One of the aspects of changing perceptions concerns our habitus, the ways in which we access and deal with the world. Habitually, inhabitants of areas in which data connection and user devices like smartphones and notebooks are fairly accessible rely on large providers for services, and the larger their data bases are, the better and more convenient are the services they provide. Thus, people (not only, but at least) in the northwestern part of the world will look to their smart phones and Google Maps for orientation, to Google and Wikipedia for knowledge and to WhatsApp for contact. The skills necessary to operate those devices and the user interfaces installed for easy access now belong to an organon of obligatory everyday knowledge. Of course, one

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<sup>11</sup> Coeckelbergh 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Bainbridge 1983.

can still do without those techniques and there are all kinds of alternatives to the brands mentioned here, but using those alternative paths becomes more and more awkward as digital natives grow up with those skills and the majority of users has access to the platforms mentioned above. As those instruments become part of the habitus – in some ways according to race, class and gender structures – those providing those instruments gain power as they access the formation of habitus. In addition to the general change of perception due to the use of a technical implement mentioned above (turn to a navigational device rather than a road map or orally transmitted geographical knowledge), this also concerns concrete material aspects, as for instance GoogleMaps structures the sights we perceive in our maps of a given city: some shops and restaurants may be featured prominently while others may not, famed sights may be highlighted, while less known museums may only be visible to the savvy. And of course, this material guidance of habitus is also power-related, as the branding entry of ‘googleing’ as a short expression for ‘search on the internet’ shows.

An even darker side to this form of habitual framing may appear in the way trust in algorithmic search engines and data processing instruments may lead to gross injustice and negative discrimination. Since such processing usually operates by taking past events and data and making use of those to project a future, past asymmetries may influence images of the future, painting the prospects of a traditionally crime-riddled neighbourhood black<sup>13</sup>; additionally, programmer’s prejudices and stereotypes usually find their ways into softwares, as social awareness is not a prominent subject in tech schools.<sup>14</sup>

But framing has not only a technical and habitual side to it, but also a narrative one. Narratives on change or, even simpler, processes effected through ICT impact the social imaginary<sup>15</sup>, thus influencing attitudes towards social relations structured through the digital. In labour contexts, the language of sports may reframe highly asymmetric and – for workers - disadvantageous labour markets as gaming contests: The platform Topcoder tried to attract potential programmers with the slogan ‘Every day a new hackathon’. Of course, religious imagery may also be found, as the title of a widely acclaimed book on digital change by the Israeli historian Yuval Harari shows. ‘Homo deus’ exploited the transhumanist narrative claiming that a change towards a world reigned by illness, poverty, death and the human condition at large was im-

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<sup>13</sup> O’Neill 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Noble 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Castoriadis 1975; Taylor 1994.

minent. The narrative presented by Harari<sup>16</sup> thus belongs to the utopy/dystopy type. Such narratives emerge in different contexts and follow different logics: Some arise in certain scientific communities, like the singularity and the transhumanist narrative. Others are launched by lobbying interest groups, like the German industry 4.0 narrative, claiming the industrial internet as an evolutionary and unavoidable phenomenon, thus masking certain interests and mystifying human-induced developments. A third type may show traits of the conspiracy narrative threatening an assimilation by sinister forces alike to the ‘Borg’ of Star Trek memory. Even though such narratives usually contain more than one element of truth, they often have a strongly ideological ring to them. The transhumanist AI and robotics narrative transported not only in popular academic books like Harari's *Homo Deus*<sup>17</sup> but also in pop-cultural iconography like the Terminator series threatens the takeover by machines. But in procuring such fears, the real power problems regarding, for instance, robotics, are mystified and obscured. To give an example: Any industrial robot closely cooperating physically with a human agent, for instance in lifting loads and putting them into the right place so the human can operate on them, needs a huge array of sensors collecting data of the human agent in order not to harm her. Length of limb, micro movements typical to an individual worker etc. need to be measured continuously and feed into some sort of mainframe. Any employer accessing those data with the right type of software may acquire knowledge on the worker in question this person may not even be aware of herself. Tiny tremors revealing the one drink too many he had the evening before, or a hidden illness, may be spotted, a knowledge that the employer may use to his or her advantage without knowledge of the employee in question.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 Economic Power and Digitization (Allocative Ressources)

The illustration of industrial robotics already shows the close entanglement of authoritative and allocative resources. The example of the data-driven platform economy, on the other hand, presents the case of a privately owned social and public space similar to the physical space enclosed by the shopping mall. This power of course invests the owners with economic power that's easily convertible into socio-political power.

As Philip Staab<sup>19</sup> has shown, digital markets are driven by a logic of non-scarcity. In opposition to physical markets dealing in finite and scarce goods, data are infinitely

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<sup>16</sup> Harari 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Harari 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Steil 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Staab 2019.

reproducible. The competitive logic is not only and to a lesser degree one of access to scarce materials and technologies, but rather one of first movers.<sup>20</sup> Those who manage to acquire a large following of users by providing services that are not directly paid for but subsidized by advertising early on may acquire a mass of data that gives them a competitive edge that later competitors may never catch up on.

Secondly, the elementary business model of such platforms is the provision of proprietary markets that control the access to goods. A market may be understood as a social institution that needs to be set up and provided for by a social entity. Usually, markets are set up by political bodies who also provide the necessary social regulations and sanctions: a body of property and exchange laws making sure that participants meet as equals and deals are considered binding, institutions that make sure such laws are kept and upheld and provide security for the market participants and so on. Platforms like Alibaba, ebay or Amazon introduce themselves as markets in the form of electronic shopping malls that make use of the political provisions and services. The subsidies in the expansion phase of such markets result in a lock-in-effect that binds consumers to the platform later on and, given a sufficiently large consumer stock, enables surplus profits through allocation instead of production by controlling information, access of sellers and buyers, prices and performance.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the translation of economic into socio-political power and social inequality is a probable outcome.<sup>22</sup> In a combination of political interest and successful lobbying activities, a private appropriation of public goods has already taken place, as platforms have been built on heavy public investment into research and buildup of digital infrastructure. Secondly, finance and digital markets merge – Jeff Bezos was a hedge funds manager before founding Amazon – in encouraging risk capital and devaluing the social power of work as service and production industry become dependent sub-contractors of the platforms functioning as proprietary markets. As the social role of consumers used to get everything in short time becomes dominant, citizenship values and habits may also decline<sup>23</sup> – and with that, we're back in the authoritative resources section.

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<sup>20</sup> Staab 2019: 29.

<sup>21</sup> Staab 2019: 206–257.

<sup>22</sup> Staab 2019: 266–286.

<sup>23</sup> Sunstein 2010.



#### 4. What's (Christian) Religion got to do with it?

The power structures resulting from digital capitalism and framing in the way depicted above may be understood as a threefold challenge to (Christian) religion.

First of all, they challenge the self-imagery of churches as parts of civil society and to church as 'community of saints', because churches usually imply members that understand themselves as inspired believers in act and deed, but not as consumers in a market setting. Even though a description of churches as economic enterprises is possible, it usually contradicts the concept of the community.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, such structures may present a challenge to Christian faithful as they adhere to framing narrations of the liberated community and individual, free to pursue fulfilment in loving one's neighbour and stewarding creation.

Thirdly, as a matter of course, Christian communities, like other religious groups, need to remain conscious of their particular position in society, as for instance argued in relation to Lefort's concept of modern democracy.<sup>25</sup> In that vein, religious communities understood as agents in civil society need to commit to a symmetric share of power for all citizens. In that regard, religious communities also have authoritative resources of their own as they pass on framing narratives of liberation and may constitute themselves as 'communities of character'.<sup>26</sup>

'Claiming the temple' thus may signify the task of rallying for an equal distribution of power and critical inquiry regarding unequal distribution of ways and means of acquiring authoritative and allocative resources regarding the digital world. In a Christian vein, the task then consists in contributing to a digital order open for all in recourse to the stories we have received and the promises connected to God's kingdom.

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<sup>24</sup> For a current systematical account of the concept of the church referred to here cf. Reuter 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Lefort 1986; Meireis 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Hauerwas 1991.

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