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Theological perspectives on a complex field

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# Minority theology

## *Theological perspectives on a complex field*

Björn Vikström, Pamela Slotte , Kim Groop,  
Pekka Lindqvist and Marie Rosenius

The aim of this article is to contribute to the development of minority theology by actualizing, developing and assessing a set of analytic tools. We strive to fulfil this aim by pursuing three parallel paths. Firstly, we relate our discussion of minority theology to other kinds of minority studies in order to benefit from theoretical perspectives and empirical findings provided by other disciplines. Secondly, because minority theology is a consequence of religious diversity, we explore how concepts developed in theology of religions and aimed at clarifying the relation to the (religious) other, can prove helpful for the task of identifying and analysing the theological coping strategies and the identity work adopted by both majorities and minorities. Thirdly, in order to avoid an all-too-encompassing definition of minority studies in theology, which might lead to a blurring of the concept, we develop and argue for a distinction between theology by, about, because of, and with minorities.

### *Introduction*

There is neither Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.  
(Galatians 3:28)

This well-known quotation underscores two important perspectives. On the one hand, universal equality should be a characteristic trait of the Christian community. On the other hand, however, this passage, together with other examples of detailed teaching in the New Testament concerning how Christians should relate to each other, implies that there were considerable tensions between believers of different backgrounds, social classes, and gender. Exegetical research has also shown how the

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existence of different theological perspectives has been a characteristic trait of the Christian tradition from its distant early phases.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity has throughout its history constantly been shaped and reshaped by various kinds of interaction between different types of majorities and minorities. The historical development of churches and religious movements has often followed a pendulum movement between unification and division. New leaders and revival movements have revitalized the tradition, but have also led to an increased plurality of opinions, interpretations and practices. This diversity has created a need for consolidation and for a clarification of what the official teaching of the Church or denomination in question is, which in turn has given birth to doctrinal debates, schisms and even excommunication of so-called "heretics".

In Northern Europe, which is the social context in which the authors of this article are situated, old and new minorities are today living side by side, and former majority churches have lost many of their adherents and their influence in society. Therefore, churches need theologically motivated strategies for how to live with diversity, and to reflect theologically on the fact that they contain several minorities as defined, for example, on theological, ethnic, linguistic or sexual grounds.

We believe that a deeper sensitivity and understanding concerning minority issues is of importance not only for religious communities, but also for academic theology. A considerable amount of theological research in different subfields involves an aspiration to understand power dynamics and tensions between minority and majority groups, movements or ideologies, even though this has seldom been consciously explicated. In this article, we build on insights achieved in these various fields of research, and our aim is to contribute to the development of minority theology by actualizing, developing and accessing a set of analytic tools. We strive to fulfil this aim by pursuing three parallel paths.

- (1) We relate our discussion of minority theology to other kinds of minority studies in order to benefit from theoretical perspectives and empirical findings provided by other disciplines.
- (2) Because minority theology is a consequence of religious diversity, we explore how concepts developed in theology of religions, (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, particularism), and aimed at clarifying the relation to the (religious) other, can prove helpful for the task of identifying and analysing the theological coping strategies and the identity work of both majorities and minorities.

- (3) In order to avoid an all-too-encompassing definition of minority studies in theology, which might lead to a blurring of the concept, we develop and argue for a distinction between theology *by*, *about*, *because of*, and *with* minorities.

Theology *by* minorities refers to contextual theological elaboration by particular minority groups, such as indigenous peoples or migrant minorities. Theology *about* minorities consists of academic studies concerning the religious beliefs, customs and practices and identities of a certain group and how they are assembled, negotiated and change. Theology *because of* minorities refers to theological reorientations triggered by religious diversity, especially the existence of minority groups inside or outside a certain denomination. Finally, theology *with* minorities points in an ecclesiastical context to a way of doing theology where representatives of different groups are encouraged to do theology together on equal terms. In an academic setting, doing theology with minorities reflects an attitude where minority representatives are not simply considered to be objects of study, but rather are agents actively generating knowledge. Tore Johnsen writes: "I have endeavoured to theologize 'with' rather than 'about' the Sámi community."<sup>2</sup>

These three tasks are not treated in distinct subsections, but elaborated throughout the whole article, even though each of them is given more attention in certain parts of the text. We start by identifying resources for minority theology from minority studies in other scientific fields and then move on to discussing the distinction between theology *by* and *about* minorities, where we end up underscoring pitfalls that are associated with writing *about* minority groups. After that we turn our attention to theology *because of* minorities. There we identify coping strategies and identity work that both majorities and minorities develop. These strategies and these processes of identity work are given a more detailed analysis in the subsequent section, where we apply concepts borrowed from theology of religions. With the help of historical examples, we argue that these strategies become visible above all in situations where the balance between majorities and minorities has changed. In the last section of the article, we present and discuss some major obstacles to doing theology with minorities.

The five authors of this article represent different theological disciplines, which gives us the opportunity to bring resources from various fields of research into a creative interaction with each other. To explicate our theoretical discussion, we pick examples mostly from the history and current situation of the Christian churches, but we have also

chosen to relate to the history of Judaism. The survival of the Jewish people as a minority despite persecutions and marginalization in hostile social contexts has required a constant balancing act between its *halakhah*, with a strong particularistic tendency, and the need to meet the powerful other in everyday contacts, especially in times of conflict. The comparison between Jewish and Christian experiences and strategies is interesting for minority theology also because Christian movements often have built their self-understanding in contrast to Judaism, at the same time identifying with the way God's people is depicted in the texts Christians call the Old Testament.

### *Minority studies and minority theology*

An academic theologian aiming to understand a minority group has to be very careful not to succumb to appropriating or romanticizing the minority perspective. The same challenges are faced by anyone speaking about religious minorities from the majority's point of view. The aim should not be to speak on behalf of the minority, but with its representatives. This requires a critical self-reflection, a process of unlearning, which includes an awareness of the unequal power structures affecting the relations between majorities and minorities.<sup>3</sup>

A major reason for the rapid development of different kinds of minority studies during the last decades is increased transnational mobility, which is a consequence both of globalization and a lack of political, economic and social stability in many countries. Migrants are both affected by their new social context, and have an impact on it, as they bring with them their religious communities, concepts and traditions. They and their offspring develop their self-understanding by rethinking and reshaping their beliefs and practices in relation to transnational, multi-layered and multi-sited social fields.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the relationships between majorities and minorities based on religious, ethnic and linguistic grounds change over time, and these social groups are often internally diverse. Depending on the characteristics considered, the same person may belong to several minorities and majorities at the same time, and it is very unlikely that one could find a person who did not belong to any minority at all.<sup>5</sup>

Studies of minorities, carried out in a wide spectrum of scientific disciplines, explore particular minority groups and their characteristics, their self-understanding and identity, and how they position themselves. The focus of these studies can be both contemporary and historical, and multi-method.<sup>6</sup> This makes minority studies a broad field of

study which various sub-disciplines of theology can tap into by adopting various theoretical, empirical and historical perspectives.

Studies of minorities also examine the governance of difference and dissent, and how society and its various institutions recognize or exclude and discriminate against these groups. Studying minorities requires focusing on questions related to unequal relations of power, lack of democratic influence, and interpretive prerogatives. Minority is never simply about numerical inferiority, but often as much about relative disadvantage and marginality. Groups that form a majority among the population might be in a minority when it comes to influencing, decision-making and the organization of communities.<sup>7</sup> Women constitute the majority in many religious communities, and they have traditionally been instrumental in the transmission of religious beliefs and customs to new generations, but their access to influence and leading positions continues to be severely restricted.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to consider that members of minorities do not necessarily want to be characterized primarily in terms of their minority position, because such characterization might be experienced as a diminishing label.<sup>9</sup>

A minority position may be interpreted in several different ways, depending on whether it is considered from within the group, based on its theological self-understanding, or from the outside. However, as with minority studies in general, an academic researcher doing minority theology of any kind must remain self-critically aware of their own positionality and embeddedness in relations of power and continuously interrogate markers of certainty “which order the experience of co-existence”.<sup>10</sup>

### *Minority theology and religious identification*

The concept of “minority theology” is seldom used, which is surprising considering the role majority-minority constellations have played in the history of Christianity – and continue to play today. When the concept is used, it often has to do with theology *by* minorities, i.e. contextual theology and religious identification developed by indigenous peoples, in which elements from the Christian tradition are brought into a cross-fertilization with their own cultural heritage. But when academic scholars investigate theology created by minorities, they are themselves usually performing a theology *about* minorities, even though they are inspired by for example perspectives from liberation theology or post-colonial studies.<sup>11</sup> Another field where the minority theology perspective has been explored is that of minority language groups inside larger denominations.<sup>12</sup>

The question of minority identities has been a frequent topic of empirical studies aiming to clarify the self-understanding of religious minority groups. There is a large number of studies *about* minorities focusing on how representatives of distinct religious traditions or movements understand their faith, their cultural and religious customs, their role in society, and how they relate to the surrounding society. Many of these studies have concerned migrant religious groups, and the methods and theories that have been adopted are often related to the concepts of *lived religion* and *vernacular religion*.<sup>13</sup> These perspectives have highlighted that religiosity cannot be restricted to investigations of beliefs and knowledge. As Marianne Moyaert puts it: “If one wants to understand what religion is, one should investigate how religion functions in the lives of religious people.”<sup>14</sup>

The concept *religious identity* is fluid and strongly impacted by historical and social circumstances. This observation applies both to individuals and communities. The identity of an individual or a group should not be described as a fixed entity, but as a continuing process. Therefore, as Ruth Illman and Mercédesz Czimbalmos have pointed out, it is often more appropriate to talk about identification than identity. For minority theology, it is important not only to look at group identification from a sociological point of view, but also to try to identify and analyse the theological resources and arguments behind the process of group identification.<sup>15</sup> The dynamic and continuing process has also been characterized as “identity work”.<sup>16</sup>

There are many pitfalls in doing theology about minorities. The “neutral”, academic perspective, or the dominant theological perspective inside a denomination, is easily considered the “normal”, while the minority perspective is treated as something extraordinary or different. We should also consider the phenomenon called “coercive mimeticism”: the representatives of the minority are often asked to speak on behalf of their tradition, and not as individuals with an identity composed of ingredients from many different sources. As a consequence, they might feel obliged, against their own will, to conform to the expectations of the researcher by maintaining cultural and theological stereotypes.<sup>17</sup>

### *Minority theology, religious diversity, and unequal power-structures*

Religious pluralism in the form of different traditions, customs and beliefs brings about a need for both minorities and majorities to

develop theologically and pragmatically motivated strategies for how to maintain their identity. These strategies might be presented as means to preserve the tradition unaltered, but in practice they usually require a thorough theological elaboration and reorientation.

Minority theology is, however, not only about religious diversity. Minority theology is often a consequence of religious intolerance, politically motivated alignment, unequal power structures, as well as a lack of influence. As a consequence, minorities are vulnerable to persecution, marginalization or assimilation. For minorities, finding the right strategy may be a question of life and death, but there are also more pragmatic questions regarding how to live among neighbours with a different faith. This challenge is exemplified by the theological development in Judaism within Medieval Europe.

The great sage of Medieval Judaism, Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), defined Christianity as the gravest form of heresy. He established the understanding that Christianity was *'avodah zarah*, “worship of an alien god”. Christians should be counted among the Talmudic category *'ovedei kochavim u-mazalot*, “worshippers of stars and zodiac signs” and – as regulated already in the Talmud – any contact with them must be avoided. This included business because a Jewish merchant selling something to a Christian just shortly before a Christian festival might support or advance idolatry.<sup>18</sup> Muslims, on the other hand, were monotheists: thus, these restrictions did not apply to them.

But how could one be a Jewish merchant, shoemaker or tailor in Christian Europe under such restrictive rules? From the twelfth century on, we meet Jewish sages in Europe who, as a coping strategy, articulate a different approach towards Christianity: what Christianity does is not worship an alien god, but *shittuf*, which means to give another entity a position beside the only God. This is of course strictly forbidden for a Jew, but not necessarily for a Gentile. Menachem Ha-Me'iri of Provence (1249–1315) went so far as to give credit to Christianity for helping to rid the world of idolatry.<sup>19</sup> If Christians are not regarded as idolaters, the everyday life of the minority in the middle of Christian Europe becomes much easier.

Christian minorities have throughout history had to deal with similar challenges. One acknowledged minority is the Waldensians, founded by the merchant and lay preacher Pierre Valdes (Peter Waldo, c. 1140–c. 1218) of Lyon. This ascetic proto-Protestant movement was excommunicated by the Catholic Church and later made subject to the Inquisition, but managed to spread to other regions in Central and Southern Europe.<sup>20</sup> The history of the Waldensian movement provides a variety



of strategies for minorities struggling to survive in a hostile environment: withdrawal, resistance, fidelity and perseverance. The Waldensians survived as an “underground church” and eventually were swept up in the wave of the Protestant Reformation and adopted a Reformed theology in the sixteenth century. Yet, voluntarily entering another religious movement required a re-evaluation of their self-understanding and identity, as their theology did not entirely align with the theology of the Swiss reformers.<sup>21</sup>

It is, however, not only minorities that are challenged by religious diversity. The existence of minorities poses a practical challenge for every religious denomination, and indeed society: how should we relate to those who believe, live or worship in another way? How do we handle differences concerning values, customs, food restrictions, clothing, gender roles and sexual orientations? How much plurality can a community harbour before it runs the risk of breaking apart because of inner tensions?

Therefore, to understand and identify theologies *because of* minorities, you need to look at how a certain church has reacted to the existence of minority groups. How is the existence of theological, linguistic, ethnic, gender or moral plurality interpreted? Which theological and ecclesiological premises can be discerned behind the strategies created and adopted for maintaining the unity of a denomination, despite the perceived plurality?

Individual churches have adopted different models for both preserving their own faith and achieving a peaceful co-existence of majorities and minorities in the same church. Some denominations have adopted policy decisions with the aim of granting equal and just treatment to all, regardless of their social status, mother tongue, ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation. Another solution is to establish congregations based on the mother tongue of the members, as in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, or on beliefs about certain theological key issues, as, for example, the system of *valgmenigheder* in the Danish Lutheran Church. A light version of this strategy is to provide ecclesiastical services for representatives of minority language groups, disabled people or ethnic minorities.

These models for the recognition and inclusion of minorities are based on an ecclesiological self-understanding that makes room for linguistic and theological and other kinds of diversity. There is, however, a need to assess whether the chosen strategies fulfil the aims they are said to secure, or whether, on the contrary, they put members of minority groups in even more vulnerable positions than before. They might for

example be portrayed as “different” or “foreign” in a way that requires them to react by intensifying their identity work.<sup>22</sup> One needs also to critically consider whether the devised models and strategies are based on the needs identified by the minorities themselves or are instead conditioned by “the majority’s hegemonic perspective”.<sup>23</sup>

Another dilemma is to what extent tolerance and equal treatment should be granted to groups who in their teaching and praxis do not respect equal rights or freedom of conscience for all. An acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism should not be confused with moral indifference.

Lastly, one important insight is that theological dividing lines often follow quite different paths than the borders between the majority and various minorities based on linguistic or ethnic characteristics. This makes the task of minority theology more intricate because different majority-minority constellations constantly overlap each other. African American evangelical congregations in the United States, for example, have represented traditional family values, but they have often, at least until recently, been politically radical concerning social justice and equality.<sup>24</sup>

### *Minority theology and the religious other*

Throughout history, it has been dangerous to be a minority, to fall outside the norms of a society, or to disagree with the theology supported by those in power. For instance, this was the case during the witch hunts of early modern Europe. As Brian Pavlac notes, it was often women, Roma, or Jews who were particularly vulnerable.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes an entire ethnic group was subject to punishment in a cooperation between church and state. In Norway, Sweden, and Finland, the Sámi People and their culture was repressed by the Lutheran church at least as far back as the late seventeenth century. As Daniel Lindmark writes, Sámi cultural expressions “were long condemned as expressions of paganism, superstition and idolatry”<sup>26</sup> and not acknowledged as a part of their contextual adaption of the Lutheran tradition – i.e. their theology by a minority. A change in attitude toward Sámi expressions was slow. For example, only in the 1990s, was a reconciliation process between the Church of Sweden and the Sámi initiated, resulting, for example, in an apology expressed by the archbishop during the synod in 2021.<sup>27</sup> Many other majority churches are also in the midst of reconciliation processes with minority groups, which points to the importance of clarifying and elaborating the concept of *Minority theology*.

Members of minority groups have often been required to carry on continuous identity work in the form of personal negotiations regarding how to preserve their identity in the middle of a majority culture. Aspects of this phenomenon are also aptly captured by the notion *lived religion*. Everyday Judaism in Europe today encounters challenges in many areas of practical *halacha*, as in Medieval times. A Jew must constantly decide whether he or she is willing to work on Saturday or share a non-kosher meal with friends. Another area of interest is intermarriage. Today the majority of the marriages of Jewish individuals in Europe are intermarriages – which for centuries has been unacceptable in Orthodox *halacha* and still today is something which any Orthodox rabbi would strongly discourage.<sup>28</sup>

In order to identify and analyse the different coping strategies adopted by both minorities and majorities in the face of religious diversity, we find it fruitful to adopt the following categories developed in the theology of religion: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism. These categories have been criticized for being too simplistic and for being overly influenced by a Western Christian understanding of religion.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, they need to be elaborated and applied with care. Still, with all their weaknesses, they cover essential attitudes towards the religious other.

Niklas Luhmann argues that doctrine arises in response to threats to the identity of a religious group. These threats can be the result of encounters with other groups, or a consequence of changes in manners, values, and worldviews in a particular society. In our article, however, we do not want to limit “strategies” only to doctrinal formulations, but also include habits, rituals, clothing and other kinds of identity markers. These strategies could therefore be interpreted as examples of that kind of identity work described by Jo Reger et al. as a laborious struggle for “creating and maintaining identity”.<sup>30</sup>

A minority can adopt an *exclusivist* strategy in the form of a withdrawal from the surrounding society, sometimes supported by a conviction of being elected. This approach may either be the result of a voluntary, theologically motivated choice, or forced upon the minority as a consequence of persecutions and marginalization. *Particularism* can be regarded as a postmodern form of exclusivism, where the possibility of evaluating the truth claims of a certain tradition from the outside is denied. Another strategy is to aim for *inclusion* through voluntarily modifying, toning down and suppressing the characteristic traits distinguishing the minority from the surrounding population and instead underscoring connecting features and markers of sameness – even at

the risk of identity blurring. An intermediary position is adopted by those communities who, based on a *pluralistic* understanding of religious truth, develop strategies in order to, for example, grant groups with different characteristics, sizes and visibility equal possibilities in society or a specific denomination.

We will return to the question of particularism later in this article, but we want to point out at this stage that corresponding strategies based on exclusion, inclusion, and a pluralistic understanding of religious truth can be adopted also from a majority position. We are seldom confronted with these strategies in a pure form. However, as history also tells us, it is obvious that exclusion leads to marginalization or expulsion, while inclusion runs the risk of overlooking or even denying the characteristic traits of the minority. The pluralistic approach leaves the floor open for mutual respect, but it can also degenerate into a kind of indifference towards other people and communities. Another, and in our opinion more fruitful, version of a pluralistic approach aims at moving beyond tolerance to an exchange of experiences, based on the conviction that both majorities and minorities can mutually benefit from the dialogue. This would be a characteristic trait of doing theology with minorities, not only about or because of them. An open and honest dialogue presupposes a willingness to identify and accept the existence of differences concerning traditions, convictions, values and perspectives. Moreover, it requires recognition of different knowledges and sites of knowledge production, as well as different positionalities, resulting, for example, from structural injustices which need to be addressed.<sup>31</sup>

### *Coping strategies during changes in majority–minority constellations*

The importance of theologically motivated strategies adopted by either majorities or minorities is made especially clear when one compares the arguments elaborated before and after a majority has become a minority or the other way around. A minority group that has survived by applying strategies based on inclusivism or pluralism in order to survive in a hostile environment, may, when achieving a majority position, develop exclusivist and triumphalist approaches to representatives of other beliefs.

The theological implications of Christianity's development from a minority, enduring insecurity and long periods of persecution, to a majority position in the Roman Empire are elaborated by Eusebius of

Caesarea (263–339) in his church history. He describes, as a kind of ideal, how Christians under “tyrant” emperors willingly witnessed to their faith despite the risk of being martyred.<sup>32</sup> However, in the tenth book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius shifts the emphasis and lays out the Christians’ radically improved position under Emperor Constantine as God’s work for his chosen people in a “new and better Jerusalem”.<sup>33</sup>

After the Constantinian Turn, Christianity became a political power with a triumphalist approach towards representatives of other faiths. The earlier view that rabbinic Judaism had managed to keep itself more or less immune to the rise of Christianity has been refuted in recent decades. The rise of Christianity brought with it restrictive legislation imposed upon the Jews, but this did not threaten the continuation of Jewish life in any part of the empire.<sup>34</sup> However, a change took place in the theology of Judaism. Themes like Torah, Messiah, Rome, and history underwent a modification, and some controversial biblical texts were strongly reinterpreted from an apologetical perspective. This reaction by Jewish leaders was an answer to the persecutions of Jews fuelled by the triumphalist claims of the church about the nullity of the Old Covenant.<sup>35</sup> Jacob Neusner calls pre-Constantinian Judaism “Judaism without Christianity” and the new phase after the Constantinian turn, “Judaism despite Christianity”.<sup>36</sup>

Because political and theological power structures have been so closely connected in the course of the history of Christianity, minority-majority constellations could change swiftly. Suddenly, the persecuted minority became the persecutor, albeit in a limited realm. One example of this is the Swiss reformation. While Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) supported the idea that Christians can advance the reformation through military action, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), after Zwingli’s death in a battle, successfully defended the Reformed church’s position in relation to the secular political power. In a tone akin to that of Eusebius, Bullinger viewed the reformed Christians as God’s people, with a duty to advance their realm. As in the Roman Empire after the Constantinian Turn, the establishment of a new position for the church in society was accompanied by fierce combat against other Christian movements and minorities.<sup>37</sup>

Christian churches and movements that have themselves departed from other church bodies have often battled minorities within their ranks. This happened, for instance, when the Pietist awakening swept over the Protestant parts of Europe in the seventeenth century. Their leaders were banished from universities and congregations for organizing conventicles or for criticizing the churches and their leaders.<sup>38</sup>

Among the Pietists themselves and in the many churches that emerged out of Pietist minorities, people with the “wrong” theology or “wrong” moral behaviour, were in a similar way harshly judged, excommunicated, and readmitted only after sincere repentance.<sup>39</sup>

Related phenomena can be noticed also in present-day Israel, where, for the first time since Late Antiquity, Judaism holds a majority position in a specific region, both in terms of numbers and power.<sup>40</sup> This has led to vivid public discussions in Israel concerning ethics and the responsibility of the majority vis-a-vis the minority, or the stronger vis-a-vis the weaker, of which Judaism has no prior experience. With reference to Exod. 23:9 (“Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners because you were foreigners in Egypt.”) it has been suggested that Israel, with its long minority experience, has an even greater moral obligation to show compassion. This remains a challenge in a society which is characterized by strong divisions and prejudices between ethnic and religious groups, as well as violent action from both parts of the conflict.<sup>41</sup>

### *Minority theology challenged by particularism and cultural-linguistic approaches*

In this article, we have pointed out some of the problems linked to doing theology about or because of minorities. But why are there not more examples of endeavours, where representatives of majorities and minorities are creating theology together? We will conclude our exposition by discussing what we characterize as two major obstacles to this. The first question concerns whether it is wise or desirable for a minority to engage in a dialogue where the majority often is the dominant part and therefore able to master the process. The second obstacle is the basic epistemological question: is understanding between representatives of different traditions possible at all?

The Jewish-Christian dialogue as we know it today began in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In 1947, the International Council of Christians and Jews was established and published the *Ten Points of Seelisberg*. Both parties were urged to deepen their dialogue. A new question faced the minority: Should a Jew be part of this at all? A landmark in this discussion is the influential essay “Confrontation” by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993), which was adopted as a statement by the Rabbinical Assembly of America. The ongoing discussion has centred on the question of whether in this essay Soloveitchik excludes

any efforts to enter into a theological dialogue, or if he instead opens the way to encountering Christianity on a clearly defined basis.

On the one hand, the problem is the incommunicability of faith matters. It is not possible for “two faith communities which are intrinsically antithetic” to share insights that are exclusively part of one’s subjective spiritual experience. But there is another aspect of this essay, even more conspicuous. Theological dialogue can be seen as a threat to the minority. For Soloveitchik, the Jews are “a community of the few” and Christianity, “the community of the many” – a vocabulary used repeatedly in the text. The interests of the “large and powerful” tend eventually to become the ones that dictate the agenda against those of the “minor and weak”. The “community of the few” soon finds itself speaking in “the language of his opponent”. He calls upon the Jewish community to “resent any attempt on the part of the community of the many to engage us in a peculiar encounter in which our confronter will command us to take a position beneath him while placing himself not alongside of us, but above us”.<sup>42</sup> Soloveitchik’s legacy is not outdated. A few years ago (2015), the first important Orthodox Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity was published.<sup>43</sup> Not surprisingly, it drew severe criticism and the words of Soloveitchik were picked up again.

This example highlights the fact that the parties engaged in dialogue are not necessarily on equal terms. There is a risk that the stronger part succeeds in defining the criteria, the applicable arguments, and the desired outcomes.<sup>44</sup> But Soloveitchik’s argumentation highlights an even more fundamental question: is understanding between different traditions possible at all? Is it possible to translate between different language games, or are religious communities incommensurable? If the latter is the case, then the best we can strive for in a pluralist context is some kind of particularism; a peaceful co-existence, where all have the right to claim their own truths, but no real exchange of influences is regarded as possible.

Particularism can be described as a post-modern and post-liberal combination of exclusivism and pluralism.<sup>45</sup> According to the so-called cultural-linguistic understanding of religion, religious traditions are compared to languages that can be learned and understood only through participating in a living community where this language is used. With reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Fagerberg likens theology to grammar. Based on this analogy, Fagerberg argues that you can use words theologically even though you are not a professional “grammarians”.<sup>46</sup> Theological language can flourish, not only within the walls of a church, but in all kinds of contexts and spaces. The term

*theological language* does not refer here to the language of any specific, sociologically identifiable Christian community, but is rather used as an umbrella term for different ways of expressing and communicating Christian faith, both in the individual lives of Christians and in the liturgical life of the churches.

The National churches have traditionally attempted to include the whole population of a country. During the course of history, this has, however, often taken the form of alignment and the curbing of differences in order to enhance both national and religious unity. Today, National churches are losing their majority position, for example in the Nordic countries,<sup>47</sup> and their theological language has evolved into a kind of a minority language in society, understood and used mainly by frequent churchgoers.

Societal factors like secularization, including privatization of religious faith, have contributed to this situation. The gradually increased separation between church and state from the nineteenth century onwards is another main factor, as it also has involved a strict separation between school education and church education. According to Jørgen Straarup and Mayvor Ekberg, the deconfessionalization of schools has led to a loss of religious language among the people of Sweden.<sup>48</sup> Before this societal change, children often learned the language needed for the transmission of the Christian faith both in school and at home, and they also experienced a living religious community where this language was practiced through prayers and hymns. Research in the Nordic context has noted a widespread “religious illiteracy”,<sup>49</sup> which indicates that traditional Christian theological language has been increasingly marginalized into a minority language. According to Henry Cöster, this phenomenon involves “a limitation of the ability to communicate, a deficiency similar to that of a human being who lacks context and the ability to read or write”.<sup>50</sup>

In a statement about church education in 2019, the General Assembly of the Church of Sweden urged the entire church to make it a long-term and systematic priority to teach and learn because it is “a fact that knowledge of Christian faith is rapidly declining in society and Church”.<sup>51</sup> The Nordic Folk Churches have during recent years tried to bridge this gap by translating traditional concepts into everyday language, because theological language has been regarded as the reason why people have felt alienated from the church and its worship.<sup>52</sup> This ambition can be regarded as an inclusivist strategy. From a cultural-linguistic perspective, however, the problem seems rather to be the opposite: the church has not spoken its own language



sufficiently and thus made inclusion even more difficult. In other words, you cannot learn a language if you are not exposed to it. Therefore, the ambition to “de-sacralize” language may in fact have widened the gap, rather than bridged it. This development has also been affected by inner-ecclesiastical factors. The Lutheran Folk Churches have in their ecclesiological self-understanding strongly emphasized the functional ecclesiological aspect (praxis reduced to transmission) at the expense of the relational ecclesiological aspect (church as fellowship with people and with God).<sup>53</sup>

For obvious reasons, linguistic minorities are eager to maintain their languages. Language has to do with identity, and if you lose your identity, you lose yourself. George Lindbeck writes: “When or if de-Christianization reduces Christians to a small minority, they will need for the sake of survival to form communities that strive without traditionalist rigidity to cultivate their native tongue and learn to act accordingly.”<sup>54</sup> This means that teaching and learning can not only take place through pedagogical efforts, but need to be based on the sacramental community. In summary: you learn to “speak the mystery” through jointly lived practice. Language requires community, community requires language.

Without taking a stand for or against the “cultural-linguistic” understanding of how religious language works, we want to highlight one important insight with crucial relevance for minority theology, and especially minority theology in the form of “theology because of minorities”: transmission of faith and traditions is not possible without a community where the language is used in a meaningful way, both in everyday life and during turning points in the life of human beings. This means that if denominations want to help minority groups to maintain and develop their religious identity, it is not enough to help them develop Bible translations and hymnals. They should also be encouraged and supported to form distinct communities where their particular theological language is used – and thereby transmitted to new generations.

The unavoidable counterargument to this linguistic understanding of religious traditions is: does this particularist strategy not lead to a sectarian and exclusivist understanding of the Christian community? If cross-cultural understanding is denied, theology about minorities is made impossible, and so is theology with minorities. However, to treat minorities and majorities as characterized by their distinct “language games” does not necessarily make understanding, dialogue and translation impossible. We should not disregard the power of interaction between people with different mother tongues. This kind of

communication is not without challenges, as also pointed out above, because important nuances may get lost. However, we are still in most cases able to learn to know and understand each other better step by step. This does, however, require that different religious and cultural traditions are not regarded as incommensurable, even though they are distinct and different.<sup>55</sup>

### *Conclusion: towards a deeper understanding of minority theology*

The aim of this article has been to contribute to the development of minority theology as an academic field. We have related minority theology to other kinds of minority studies and presented a sample of minority studies from different theological perspectives. Through this non-comprehensive exploration of the field of research, we have been able to identify some of the common traits in these different theological approaches to minority research.

Minority theology needs to build upon the insights attained through minority studies in other disciplines. Among these fruitful elements, we have recognized the need to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and the importance of recognizing multiple knowledges and sites of knowledge production, acknowledging the role of unequal power structures, lack of influence, marginalization and other social processes.

With the help of examples drawn from various strands of theological scholarship, we have been able to show that an analysis of various majority-minority constellations is a necessary element in the academic endeavour to clarify the role of religious identification, both for the individual and for societies. Our investigation has, among other things, highlighted two fundamental dimensions of minority studies, including theological ones: How do individuals and groups understand themselves and develop their *identity* in relation to and in contrast with others? What kind of *strategies* do they adopt, both as individuals and as a group, in order to safeguard their identities and interests in relation to the surrounding society and the traditions of the majorities? These questions of religious identification and strategy are important to reflect upon from the majority's perspective as well. The identity of the majority is often constructed in contrast to, "because of", those who are considered different, and the strategies adopted by the majority to manage religious, cultural or ideological

plurality are closely linked to the way the majority constructs its own identity.

In order to identify and analyse the abovementioned strategies, adopted by both majorities and minorities, we have found it fruitful to apply the concepts developed in theology of religion: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism. As long as we are critically aware of the risk that these concepts may oversimplify the examined theological approaches, they can be applied as tools for identifying, and distinguishing between, the abovementioned strategies. We have found that the importance of these kinds of coping strategies becomes especially visible when majorities turn into minorities or vice versa: In a radically changed social context, religious communities are challenged to re-evaluate and elaborate their theological self-understanding in relation to the religious other. Through our discussion of the particularist strategies proposed by cultural-linguistic approaches, we have sought to highlight the possibilities opened by the ambition to treat religious communities as language communities. At the same time, however, we have wanted to challenge the exclusivist strands of this approach by arguing that minority theology, especially in the form of the theology about and with minorities, becomes pointless if the possibility to achieve understanding between different traditions is denied.

By distinguishing between the perspectives of studies *about* minorities, theology made *by* minorities, and theology *because of* minorities, we have sought to identify and point out the different dimensions and scopes of minority theology. Theology about minorities refers to academic research aiming at discovering the theological self-understanding and religious identification among members of minorities. The methods can vary from analysis of texts to ethnographic or other empirical studies. Minority theology by minorities can be a scope of theology about minorities, as it refers to the contextually, culturally and linguistically sensitive theological elaboration of a minority group. Theology because of minorities, lastly, turns the attention to how certain denominations or individual theologians react to the existence of minorities both inside and outside their own tradition.

One of the main conclusions of this article, however, is that there is a need to further elaborate on a fourth dimension: theology made *with* minorities. To do theology with minorities requires, that communication, understanding and translation is possible between different communities and traditions. Therefore this practice presupposes a hermeneutics of intercultural understanding.

In order to reach this goal, there are certain obstacles that need to be taken into account and many pitfalls that need to be avoided. An ambition to “embrace diversity” does not automatically liberate the theologian from all hidden and unconscious racist or prejudiced attitudes. The representatives of a minority should not be required to conform to the expectations of the dominant part. Nor should they be required to speak on behalf of their whole community, but rather as unique individuals, influenced not only by their own cultural heritage, but also by many other strands in society and church. An academic scholar doing theology about minorities needs to be self-critically aware of the privileged position they occupy, and the same goes for the representative of a majority group in a church which engages in a dialogue with minority groups. Minorities should not be treated in simplifying ways as exotic strangers through a strengthening of cultural stereotypes, but neither as “model minorities”, praised for their apt assimilation into the majority culture.

One fundamental critical question remains to be considered: to what extent is it meaningful to distinguish minority theology from other kinds of theology – and what would be the purpose and the benefit of this terminological shift? For example, liberation theology shares many of the aims of minority theology, with its option for the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchized and the powerless, while theology of religions, like minority theology, focuses on religious diversity. By highlighting the concept of minority theology, we, however, want to underscore the significant role that different coping strategies created to handle majority-minority constellations play in the forming of religious identities. Understanding religious minorities is a requirement for the understanding of the role of religion in the past, today, and in the future.

Björn Vikström  
Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology  
Åbo Akademi University  
Turku  
Finland

Pamela Slotte  
Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology  
Åbo Akademi University  
Tehtaankatu 2, Turku FI-20500 Finland, Center of Excellence in Law,  
Identity and the European Narratives, University of Helsinki

Helsinki  
Finland  
pamela.slotte@abo.fi

Kim Groop  
Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology  
Åbo Akademi University  
Turku  
Finland

Pekka Lindqvist  
Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology  
Åbo Akademi University  
Turku  
Finland

Marie Rosenius  
Department of Historical Philosophical and Religious Studies  
Umea University  
Umea  
Sweden

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### *Notes*

1. See e.g. Räisänen, *Rise of Christian Beliefs*.
2. Johnsen, *Sámi Nature-Centered Christianity*, 29.
3. *Ibid.*, 124–5.
4. See e.g. Levitt, Lucken, and Barnett, “Beyond Home and Return.”
5. From this follows the “need to consider the multiple and intersecting bases and discourses around ‘difference’, belonging, and minority status” and investigate what would be the apt way “to capture the growing heterogeneity in many contemporary societies.” Song, “Rethinking Minority Status.”
6. See e.g., Vuola, *Eletty uskonto*.
7. See e.g. Gunner and Slotte, “Rights of Religious Minorities,” 33; Song, “Rethinking Minority Status”; Toivanen and Kmak, “Exclusion and Inequality,” as well as

- various contributions to the European Yearbook of Minority Issues, <https://www.ecmi.de/publications/european-yearbook>, and the Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe, <https://www.ecmi.de/publications/jemie>.
8. Trzebiatowska and Bruce, *Why are Women*, 16–17.
  9. Gunner and Slotte, "Rights of Religious Minorities," 32.
  10. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 218.
  11. Among these studies, there are, for example, investigations of the religious identity and contextual theology among the Sámi people. Sundström, "Reconstructing Religious Identity," 211–28.
  12. Morris, "Towards a Liberation Theology," 58–70.
  13. See Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being," 173 for a list of these kind of studies.
  14. Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 164.
  15. Illman and Czimbalmos, "Knowing, Being". See also, e.g. Anthias, "Interconnecting Boundaries," 174–6.
  16. On identity work, see e.g. Gray et al. "Identity Work"; and Reger, Einwohner, and Meyers, "Identity Work."
  17. Goto, "Writing in Compliance," 114–15.
  18. Maimonides however allowed discussion with Christians, but only for the reason that it might lead them to reject their idolatry and turn to Judaism. Mishne Tora (Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 9:4).
  19. For both references, and a broader discussion on the topic, see Ellenson, "A Jewish View," 74.
  20. Roach, *The Devil's World*, 78–83; Chidester, *Christianity*, 282; Välimäki, *Heresy*, 116–19.
  21. Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, 162–8, 172–4.
  22. Ezzedine and Poyrazil, "Perceived Ethnic Discrimination."
  23. Toivanen and Kmak, "Exclusion and Inequality," 147.
  24. Margolis, *From Politics*, 148–51.
  25. Pavlac, *Witch Hunts*, 59, 97.
  26. Lindmark, "Jojk som bro," 85 (our translation).
  27. Johnsen, "Erkänd historia," 101–2; Lindmark, "Jojk som bro," 86.
  28. See Czimbalmos, *Intermarriage*.
  29. Wirén, *Hope and Otherness*, 5–16.
  30. Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, 59–61; Reger et al., *Identity Work*, 3–4.
  31. See e.g. Kmak and Björklund, "Introduction," 1–4.
  32. Chidester, *Christianity*, 156; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 195–7, 286–9, 355–7, 365–7.
  33. *Ibid.*, 358.
  34. Stemberger, *Jews and Christians*, 315.
  35. Neusner's trilogy of studies is dedicated to these perspectives. See Neusner, *Judaism in the Matrix*; Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity*; Neusner, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*. Also Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai*.
  36. Neusner in several works, e.g., *Judaism in the Matrix*, xvi.
  37. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 169, 222, 270–1; Riuttala, *Kirche und Gesellschaft*, 82–92.
  38. Shantz, *An Introduction*, 107–11.
  39. Little, *The Origins*, 113–15.
  40. By saying this, we leave small, half-isolated communities, like those of Brooklyn, New York, or Stamford Hill, London (the largest Jewish concentration in Europe today), aside. In them, Jews form the majority, but it is not a power position.
  41. See e.g. the report *Israel's Religiously Divided Society* on the Pew Research Centre's website <https://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/>.

42. Soloveitschik, "Controversy," xx.
43. *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*.
44. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 116.
45. Wirén, *Hope and Otherness*, 16–19.
46. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima*, 2–3.
47. For further theoretical perspectives about Folk Church as a minority Church, see Thidevall et al., *Svenska kyrkan som minoritetskyrka*.
48. Straarup and Ekberg, *Den sorgglöst försumliga kyrkan*, 10.
49. See Straarup and Ekberg, *Den sorgglöst försumliga kyrkan*, and Fahlgren, "Religiös analfabetism nära."
50. Cöster, "... bedriva undervisning ... ", 17 (our translation).
51. "Kyrkomötets uttalande om undervisning," (our translation).
52. Thalén, "Ett inkluderande språk?" 9–29.
53. Rosenius, *Samarbetskyrkan*, 142.
54. Lindbeck, *The Church*, 193.
55. Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, 196.

## ORCID

Pamela Slotte  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4271-6982>

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