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# Religious Minorities: conceptual perspectives

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## Abstract

This essay proposes definitions of key terms such as ‘minoritization’, ‘majoritization’, and ‘religious minority’, and problematizes standard criteria of identification of religious minorities while also advocating for an understanding of religious minorities as dynamic, processual, relational, contextual, situational, and intersectional. By doing this, it also warns against homogenizing representations of religious minorities and addresses minorities within minorities. It presents several important distinctions among and within religious minorities in terms of size, location, origin, legitimacy, recognition, social position, and self-perceptions. The essay discusses the mechanisms that turn assemblages of people into minorities and different criteria and strategies that establish such social formations as ‘religious minorities.’ This includes processes of recognition and non-recognition by societies and different forms of minorities (‘wild’ and ‘tame’ ones). The essay historicizes the emergence of the category and the problem of ‘religious minorities’ in the context of colonialism, modern conceptions of the nation-state, democracy, and international politics. Last but not least, it reflects on the importance of religious minorities as a theme for research, and as a lens for understanding the dynamics of religion in society.

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Acknowledgments

The term 'religious minorities' (or some vernacular equivalent) is part of the common lexicon of political language; in many countries this and similar terminologies such as 'minority religions', 'minor religions', or 'minority religious groups' are used in everyday talk, in self-identifications, and in processes of othering. The term is also used to celebrate 'diversity', 'pluralism', 'multiculturalism', and similar ideas. Majority/minority tropes are also invoked by people who are numerically a majority, but claim to have lost their predominance in a society or remember their past, real or imagined, as a minority; mobilizing an understanding of being 'a threatened majority' is a typical ingredient of what Arjun Appadurai calls "predatory identities"—namely, such identities "whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other, proximate social categories" (Appadurai 2006, 51). In contexts where homogeneity is emphasized, such as nationalist discourses, minorities can be perceived as potentially disruptive and dangerous, and feature prominently in conspiracy narratives. Similarly, the fear of a perceived threat implies dichotomised views about 'good' and 'bad' minorities. This essay offers a discussion of conceptual perspectives on religious minorities; we will begin by proposing definitions of key terms.

## Definitions

In 1979, Francesco Capotorti, an Italian lawyer who for a long time served as Italy's representative in the United Nations General Assembly, published an extensive discussion of the concept of minority. Capotorti also proposed the following definition:

a group, numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members—being nationals of the State—possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the

population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language. (Capotorti 1979, 96, paragraph 568)

Capotorti drafted his report during his tenure as Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (see below). The definition was put forward after consultation with various governments. In 1985, the then Special Rapporteur of the same Sub-Commission, the Canadian judge Jules Deschênes, revised this definition as follows:

A group of citizens of a State, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that State, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law (Deschênes 1985, 30, paragraph 181).

The supposed aim of achieving equality shows the normative agenda of this definition. Both definitions are (a) numerical and (b) teleological: (a) they use numbers as the core defining features and (b) they assume a directionality and intentionality, or a “will” that makes them appear as driven by a common goal. This essay will show that both assumptions are problematic.

While Capotorti and Deschênes focus on the internal dynamics of minorities and emphasize numbers, other definitions shift the focus to the treatment minorities receive by society at large. For example, the American *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers several definitions of ‘minority.’ Among them is the following (3.a):

a part of a population thought of as differing from the rest of the population in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment.

This wording implies two main defining features, a negative and a positive one: fractionation and differentiation. In a negative sense, even though the definition avoids a strictly quantitative perspective, minorities can never be the whole population, but must be a fraction thereof. The positive feature has two corresponding dimensions: mind (thinking) and body (action)—difference as perceived and as enacted. The wording “subjected to [...] treatment” makes clear that the agency is perceived as not lying with the minority “part of the population” but with the majority. This agentive dimension is now often expressed by the transitive verb “to minoritize”, which at the time of writing (January 2023) has not yet found its way into the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* but is already included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which gives the following description:

To make (a person, group, or concept) a minority; to treat as or place in a minority; to force (an individual, minority group, etc.) to the periphery of a dominant group, to marginalize.

Similarly, the transitive verb ‘to majoritize’ should be established to point to the corresponding process (Predelli et al. 2012, 107). As neither the *Merriam-Webster* nor the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides lexical definitions of this word we may stipulate the following definition of ‘to majoritize’:

To make (a person group, concept) a majority; to treat as or place as a majority; to afford an agent (an individual, group, etc.) to be at the center as a supposed representative of an assumed majority; to assign to others or oneself a position of relative agency and power (dominance, hegemony, or supremacy).

Although earlier attempts to identify ‘objective’ features of minorities had the advantage of making it more difficult for states to deny the existence of (religious) minorities on their territory (Ghanea 2012, 63), these emerging terms indicate an important shift in the scholarly perspective (White 2011, 23–27). Rather than prioritizing overarching categories (‘minority’) and collectives (‘groups’), scholars increasingly pay attention to what subjects think and feel, namely to the experiences of being placed in a minority position. Moreover, seemingly stable categories like ‘minority’ are becoming less relevant than processes and constructions that turn people into minorities or place them in minority positions (see Gunaratnam 2003).

This constructivist–processual perspective finds its expression in the noun ‘minoritization’,<sup>[1]</sup> which at the time of writing can be found neither in the Merriam Webster nor in the Oxford English Dictionary (an interesting example of how academic jargon sometimes is ahead of common language). We propose the following definition of the noun ‘minoritization’:

Structures and processes that make some (person, group, concept) a minority.

Correspondingly, here is our definition of the noun ‘majoritization’<sup>[1]</sup>:

Structures and processes that make some (person, group, concept) a majority.

Any analysis and theory must keep in mind the interrelatedness of these two processes because there is no majoritization without minoritization and vice versa. Likewise, there are no minorities without a majority as much as “majorities need minorities to exist, even more so than the reverse” (Appadurai 2006, 50). In principle, any analysis of the dynamics of minoritization/majoritization requires a holistic field perspective, and any theory of minoritization/majoritization would need to bring to light the structures and processes that allow for majoritization/minoritization to work — for example, by including ‘othering’ through language and other forms of social practice that allow for majoritization/minoritization to work.

A critical theory of majoritization/minoritization would seek to destabilize such a system, to make it less oppressive for the minoritized parts in the whole, for the sake of equality and justice, and in the name of liberty. Even for states that are neither committed to anti- or pro-religious agendas, this poses the dilemma that ameliorating religious inequality will require them to enter prohibited territory by actively regulating the field of religion. Likewise, the acceptance or even embrace of ‘minority’ as an identity marker or seeking the social and/or legal status of minority are not neutral acts because when a state recognizes a group as a minority this “transforms its self-understanding” (Mahmood 2016, 60).<sup>[2]</sup> Rather, these decisions or choices are effects of either or both minoritization by a ‘majority’ and the agency of the respective ‘minority’, directed to seeking out particular benefits, either in society or within a particular social group.<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, the label of minority and official and unofficial practices that minoritize certain groups or individuals,

are never merely descriptive of a social reality but serve the interests of one social group 'minoritizing' another or a social group minoritizing itself. In this sense, 'minority' is "a political term" (Mahmood 2016, 54). For this reason, reflexive scholarship no longer uses 'religious minorities' as a neutral descriptor but asks, for example, why and for what reasons certain groups came to be classified as 'religious minorities' by certain actors in certain contexts and situations (e.g. White 2011).

Religion can come into play in this field in various ways. For example, being part of a certain religion can be an attribute of minoritized or majoritized individuals. Religion affords particular resources for the working of minoritization/majoritization. To make a minority a religious minority we can modify the definition provided by Merriam-Webster as follows: a religious minority is a part of a population that regards itself and/or is regarded by others as differing from the rest of the population in characteristics categorized as religious or relating to a religion. This is not a definition that fits all purposes, nor will it be useful in all possible contexts. In the following, we will focus on religious minorities as collectives and unpack several implications of the discussed terminology. [\[4\]](#)

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## Relational, contextual, situational

As aforementioned, the meaning of minority is relational, contextual, and situational—the latter term referring to specific choices made in given contexts by specific actors based on their respective interests, necessities, and opportunities. As this article's previous discussion about definitions of minoritization and majoritization has shown, speaking of a minority only makes sense by contrasting it with or distinguishing it from an (assumed) majority (e.g. Gurr 1993, 163). In other words, to call something a minority implies that it is essentially different from a majority. Religious diversity alone does not necessarily result in the existence of religious minorities. Indeed, where several religions (understood as religious communities, groups, or traditions) coexist of whom none is acknowledged to be considerably larger and/or more powerful than the others, and where all are considered as members of the same category, we can avoid speaking of religious minorities. However, if in the same context there are micro religions (such as so-called new religious movements) that are not being treated on an equal level by this assemblage of minor religions, these micro religions could then be considered minority religions.

Moreover, as will be discussed more in detail below, when political bodies or dominant media label a group as a religious minority or, conversely, deny a group to be recognized as such, or when members of a group embrace or reject the identity of religious minority, these are not merely matters of definition but processes or decisions with important social, political, and legal implications. For instance, some groups resist the label of minority because they do not like its association with victimization (Gleason 2019, 98) or with illegitimacy. This association can lead to further isolation (Murre-van den Berg 2016, 6) or persecution, risk dividing rather than uniting people, or foster a condition of fear of and among minorities (see also Rowe 2019, 4). These reasons and the subsequent choice to accept or reject the 'minority' label depend on different ideological positions and situational concerns, such as territorial autonomy or nationalist discourses (see White 2011, 54-55).

The contextual setting of minority discourses is also highlighted in how different disciplines, such as anthropology, history, law, international relations, politics, and sociology, to name but the most salient ones, employ and define the term. These disciplines have different research questions, theoretical models, and empirical materials, but rarely engage in a dialogue with each other.

Context, however, is not only societal and academic, but also historical. Therefore, we need to always historicize the category instead of treating it as a timeless notion (see also White 2011, 26, who aims to “recover the historicity of the concept”). In addition to the realm of taxonomy, also religious minorities are ever changing internally and externally—and so are the historical contexts, so that some religions that were majorities at one time in the past are now minorities, like Zoroastrianism in Iran. In some European countries, formerly dominant varieties of Christianity have in recent years lost their socio-cultural-political prominence as *the* majoritarian religion. The fact that their population ratio has declined beyond 50 percent in several countries symbolizes this change of status. While the processual approach outlined above for the terms minoritization/majoritization points to the temporal dynamics of the concept of religious minorities in specific situations, we will focus on its historicity further below.

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## Intersectional minorities

While ethnic, language, national, and racial minorities each enjoy distinct legal protections<sup>[5]</sup> and are established concepts that constitute fields of scholarship in their own right, the case of religious minorities shows that these types of minorities are often intersectional. To begin with, many religious minorities are also ethnic/racial or language minorities, meaning that such groups can be described by stakeholders, governments, scholars, media, and others by invoking any of these three categories of minority. Scholars have proposed terms such as ‘ethno-religious minority’ or attempt to distinguish between such categories by for instance defining the non-religious attachment to tradition and culture as a trait that distinguishes ethnic from religious minorities (Rößner, Gvili and Eisend 2021, 392). Yet, whether minorities are labeled as religious or not tends to depend, rather than on scholarly skills of classification, on the strategic interests or tactical moves of those who decide which category to use. In South Asia, caste is an important factor and, when interfaith marriages are dubbed intercaste marriages, this shows the prevalence of caste over religion (Thomas 2018). The Pakistani case of the Christian low-caste woman manual worker Asia Bibi who in 2010 was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death, then later acquitted whereupon she left the country in 2019, illustrates the dynamics of intersectionality: the original accusation centered on caste, and only later did the issue of caste-pollution turn into a religious blasphemy case (Fuchs and Fuchs 2020, 63). Gender, sex, and class also factor in here. The conjunction of caste and religion has resulted in the scholarly trope of ‘double discrimination’ on caste and religious grounds (Fuchs and Fuchs 2020, 54).

In religious studies and religious liberty advocacy discourses, among others, there is the tendency to single out religion as the main identifier or super-category, which can result in an analytical overemphasis of religion compared to other factors. Such qualifying a minority as religious reinforces the degree of perceived difference. Being a religious minority is then the super-identity that covers the others and obscures the fact that

adherents of minority religions in most countries share the same plight as people belonging to the majority, for example when facing economic hardship, corruption, ecological degradation, societal violence, war, and political failure (see also Fuchs and Fuchs 2020, 59).

In other instances, like in early modern Spain, religion is superseded by other factors of identity—in that case, it was not enough for Jews or Muslims to become Christians to be admitted to the dominant part of society because conversos (Jewish converts and their descendants) and moriscos (Muslim converts and their descendants) lacked the alleged *limpieza de sangre* ('purity of blood') claimed by the Christian majority (Shahar 2007, § 12). Similarly, in Nazi Germany, Jews were considered primarily in racial terms, so that even Jews who had converted to Christianity and their descendants continued to be considered Jews and were therefore deemed targets for extermination; Judaism was not regarded as a religious minority but as an inferior and dangerous race—race was the super-category, not religion.

Minorities can also benefit from the multiplicity of labels—for instance, by emphasizing shared ethnicity with the majority. One example are Vietnamese Catholics, who find their religious minority status alleviated by their belonging to the ethnic Viet majority (Trần 2016, 135). Similarly, Zoroastrians in Iran and Copts in Egypt consider themselves the original inhabitants of their respective countries, suggesting that their claim to primordality and indigeneity outweighs their relatively lower numbers.

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## The primacy of numbers

On the surface, the term 'minority' seems clear and unambiguous insofar as the key essential (monothetic) defining trait is held to be a quantitative one: a minority is lesser in number than the rest of the population. Even though this primarily quantitative approach has raised concerns for qualitative and critical research in the humanities and the study of culture (Laurie and Khan 2017), it continues to be widespread and has played an important role in the emergence of the concept of minorities. Even though numbers alone are no longer considered the most relevant feature of minorities—the theoretical focus shifting to power and related issues—numbers remain salient as a primary identifier.

Quantitative management of population can set minoritization and majoritization processes into motion. Identifying a group as a minority in a quantitative sense presupposes a numerical (demographic) assessment of the entire population, for example in the form of a census. The most well-known example is the census of India that was initiated by the British colonial rulers around 1872. Contrary to the census conducted in Great Britain (since 1801), the census of India included a question on religion, where the latter category was broken down into 9 distinct and mutually exclusive categories: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Parsi [Zoroastrian], Jewish, Animist. (The last category was tailored to apply mainly to Adivasis, the indigenous or tribal peoples of India). Presumably, this categorization was based on the assumption that Indian society was in fact already divided among these lines.<sup>[6]</sup> The practical implications of this religious categorization in the census posed many difficulties for the officials, and respondents were forced to make unprecedented binary and counterintuitive identifications—like being a Jain would now mean not being a Hindu, or Shaivites as well as Vaishnavas having to opt

for the category ‘Hinduism,’ and several ‘fuzzy’ communities/groups that combined ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ features—eventually had to be defined according to one of the official categories of religious affiliation. Collapsing the complexity of religious groups, orientations, and traditions into the category Hindu first constituted this entity as a demographic majority; it is only after the census and its specific way of classification that some Hindu leaders came to perceive that Hindus were a majority in British India and that Muslims and others were minorities. As the census was conducted every ten years, it also allowed tracking demographic developments. For example, since the early twentieth century, it gave rise to the perception that the population classified as Muslim was growing faster than the Hindus, thereby creating the rhetorical trope of Hindu decline and Muslim takeover (Bhagat 2013). Superior birth rates among minorities and their growth by proselytization are quantitative features that can feed into fears among majorities. In other countries, the use of a comprehensive category of ‘others’ in censuses or official statistics can serve to obscure the degree of religious diversity. In Japan, for instance, the Yearbook of Religion (shūkyō nenkan) published annually by the Agency for Cultural Affairs gives three main options—namely, Buddhism, Shinto, Christian, plus one ‘other’—so religious groups could either select one of the three main categories or be classified under a generic ‘other’, independently of their size.<sup>[7]</sup> The importance of numbers reflects the rise of democracy as a dominant form of government, where most (but not all!) segments of the population are eligible to participate in elections and where each vote counts equally. Historically, democracy emerged in nation states, and the combination of these two modern political features—the nation state and democracy—made the concept of minority politically salient (see also Mahmood 2016; Østebø and Pontzen 2022).[2] Minorities were no longer subjects of imperial patronage but were measured up quantitatively within territorial boundaries of the nation states and their increasing control over populations within their territories. The minorities’ rights were defined in the interplay of international and national law and politics.

This perceived importance of numbers is also reflected in disputes about them and about the criteria governments use to make censuses. Nearly all religious minorities in Pakistan claim that the government systematically underreports their numbers or refuses to acknowledge their existence by classifying their members as ‘other’ (Fuchs and Fuchs 2020, 61–62). Likewise, Japan bases the minority status on so-called ‘new religions’, which are not necessarily numerically small, on the perceived difference between them and ‘traditional’ practices and organizations. In other words, rather than the smallness of their numbers it is the gap that separates them from what is defined as tradition that is relevant (Reader 2015).

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## Classification for extraction: taxing religious minorities

Let us move back in history. Can we find similar classificatory strategies in pre-modern times? Several ancient states and empires, including ancient Egypt, China, and Rome, have indeed undertaken censuses of their population, but mainly for administrative purposes, in particular taxation, and religion does not appear as a category here. The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) describes several incidents of a population census, partly for reasons of taxation—the costs for the Tabernacle are to be paid based on a poll tax (head/capita tax)—but also in relation to the foundation narrative of the exodus: God commands Moses to take a census while the people find themselves in the “wilderness of Sinai”; a second census is



commanded by the deity after a plague. These incidents are narrated in a text that in Latin became known as *Numeri*, the book of Numbers, a name that highlights the paramount importance of counting. The most famous biblical kings, David and Solomon, each conducted a census—David even against God's will (2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21). Solomon had the foreigners counted and subsequently assigned them to specific tasks, as carriers and stonecutters. Even though we have no information on these foreigners—for example in terms of their religious identity—we can read this as an early instance of differential treatment and classification; we can assume that these foreigners were maybe also a minority. While in this case, classification resulted in the assignment of specific duties, in other cases, classification could result in different forms of taxation.

Some first incidents of religion-specific forms of taxation—that is taxes on religious minorities *avant la lettre*—made their appearance during the first millennium CE. They were first applied to Jews and Christians. After the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE, the Roman emperor Vespasian imposed a tax on Jews—applicable not only to male adults, but also to women, children, and slaves. The revenues of this so-called *fiscus Iudaicus* were directed to a Jupiter temple in Rome; thus, money was extracted from one religious group to support a cultic structure of another, more powerful, group and its religious infrastructure. At the same time, that payment served as a kind of religious ransom by making the tax-paying Jews exempt from the duty to sacrifice to the emperor. After the reform of the 'Jewish tax' by emperor Nerva in 96 CE, Christians who claimed not to follow Jewish ancestral ways could avoid the tax—thereby possibly accelerating the “parting of the ways” between Jews and Christians (Heemstra 2010). It is unclear when the tax was abolished, but in 1342 it was revived by Emperor Louis IV the Bavarian under the name *Guldenpfenning* or *Goldener Opferpfennig*. Jews had to pay special taxes in many European countries from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. Yet, they were never referred to as a minority religion/religious minority during this long period. They were treated as a singular and exceptional case, not as a species belonging to the genus of minorities.

A taxation relevant classification of the population where religious identities come into play is also attested for the Sasanian empire in pre-Islamic Iran. There are Christian hagiographical sources from the early fifth century that report about a fourth century king (Shapur II) who is said to have extracted from Christians double the ordinary rate of the poll tax; moreover, the ecclesiastical head of the Christian community of one region of the empire was to take responsibility to collect this tax (Goodblatt 1979, 249). It is unclear to what extent this was an extraordinary measure or whether it reflected the ordinary state of affairs; there is no hard evidence that a similar arrangement applied to the Jewish population of the Sasanian empire. So, we cannot speak of differential treatment for religious minorities—a concept that did not, it seems, steer the political thinking of the actors at that time. In Islamic legislation, which in part was inspired by pre-Islamic (Sasanian) precedence, a new religion-based taxonomy of taxation emerged; the population was divided into Muslims and non-Muslims, where separate sets of taxes were applied to each category, with the non-Muslims (*dhimmi*) being obliged to pay a poll tax (*jizya*) not levied from Muslims. In sum, taxation has been an important context for distinguishing different segments of population, where groups that we today would classify as religious minorities have been treated differently from the majority; taxation was acted out as minoritization.

## Subordination and discrimination: 'Wild' and 'tame' minorities

Often described as a contractual arrangement to ensure the 'protection' of these religions, the dhimmi-status also amounted to minoritization in the sense of structural subordination within an Islamic policy. In other words, it combined opportunities for civic and religious self-governance with negative discrimination. By contrast, the modern discourse of religious minorities problematizes such a status of structural subordination, and presents discrimination as a practice that should be condemned and abolished. It premises as unjust and immoral the facts that religious minorities are marginalized, suffer violence, or are experiencing some kind of power imbalance vis-à-vis the majority population in the form of, for instance, restricted access to or exclusion from institutions. This modern discourse on religious minorities is tied to the political ideal of social and religious equality—that no religion counts more than others—and equality between religious communities, even if one community has more members or enjoys certain privileges.

This premise that subordination and discrimination require remedy is expressed in calls for action and in actual policies by states. For instance, the legal scholars Gideon Sapir and Daniel Statman (2019), who write about Israel, argue that religious minorities should be given additional support or preferential treatment to remedy their disadvantaged situation. This notion of preferential treatment of (religious) minorities has been put into practice, often with ambivalent effects—for instance, by the U.S. and Canadian governments to improve the social position of Native Americans/First Nations.

Yet, discussions and practices aiming at emancipation and support of religious minorities usually come with conditions. Majority societies that profess these values nevertheless tend to distinguish, at least implicitly, between 'wild' (nonconformist, problematic) and 'tame' (conformist, unproblematic) religious minorities (see Seiwert 2014 for the term 'wild religion' as a form of nonconformism). The former are considered a challenge to the normative order, often rooted in dominant models of religion, on which society is built. 'Wild' religious communities are perceived as rejecting societal values and refusing to integrate or compromise and therefore as violating fundamental social agreements. 'Tame' religious minorities, in contrast, appear to be content with their assigned place in society without making demands for change or 'creating problems,' even though their ideology may, at least in theory, reject or be in disagreement with wider society values and practices. Due to this, they are usually not seen as a threat but as a good example other minorities should follow.

Moreover, the (secular) attempt by states to achieve a position of neutrality vis-à-vis religious claims tends to position the state as the arbiter of religious difference. States, however, have widely different understandings of religious equality (Mahmood 2016), and these understandings are usually rooted in the majority's hegemonic standard against which minorities are measured (Østebø and Pontzen 2022).

However, it would be incorrect to assume that religious minorities are invariably powerless in processes of minoritization or othering. Some of them may resist and actively respond to the fact that they are perceived as a potential threat, or as “objects of fear and of rage” (Appadurai 2006, 49). Others may embrace the minority status as a form of empowerment, by rejecting mainstream values or views they disagree and creating a feeling of elitism amongst members. In recent decades, following what has been called the minorities rights revolution (Skrentny 2002), minorities have become more vocal in asserting and protecting their rights (Østebø and Pontzen 2022, 118).

Discrimination in the sense of restrictions that are imposed on minorities but not on the majority, as well as other forms of marginalization or even persecution and violence, are typical experiences of religious minorities. However, this is not always the case. Minorities can be treated equally with the majority religion, even though this rarely happens in practice. Moreover, the typical experience of discrimination does not mean that all religious minorities are always powerless. Sometimes rulers belong to religious minorities (e.g. in contemporary Syria). Religious minorities can be conquerors (like the Christian Normans in Sicily; see Weltecke 2017, 17 for other examples) or colonial powers, who rule over a population they tend to consider inferior on ideological (often including religious) grounds. In such cases, minorities can be oppressive powers. Last but not least, some religious minorities enjoy an elevated socio-economic status. An example are the Parsis in colonial India, whose high social position can be explained by, among others, how the British Empire was in part built on cooperation with ethnic and religious minorities (Biagini 2012, 234). The British Empire's approach is not unique, but reflects a common imperial strategy to patronize and advantage minorities that are perceived as more dependent on and thus more loyal to the rulers. Despite experiencing discrimination, religious minorities can even be economically more successful than the majority population—as was sometimes the case with Christians and Jews in the Ottoman empire, partly due to their business connections to and active support by other European powers. Moreover, intersectionality with other social determinants such as caste can make a religious minority's social position, or at least of a part of this group, superior to that of a (part of the) majority. The Syrian Christians in the South Indian state of Kerala are an example of such a privileged minority, sharing several traits, including dress, with upper caste Hindus; a religious minority can thus enjoy a high rank in the caste system and belong to the upper-class stratum of society (Thomas 2018).

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## Density and geographical scale

The cases of the Christians and Jews in the Sasanian and successive Middle Eastern Muslim empires bring to mind the importance of population density and geographical scale (in addition to numbers). There were administrative parts and regions of the Sasanian empire—even in its political core lands, Mesopotamia—where Jews and Christians constituted the numerical majority of the population. Likewise, during the first centuries of rule of Muslim dynasties, Muslims did not constitute most of the population on the conquered territories. Even after Islam had been adopted by most of the population in the Middle East, minority religions continued to thrive in some territories including towns and cities, and in most of the European parts of the Ottoman Empire, Muslims never became the numerical majority of the population. The Middle East is also an example of how religious minorities have often found refuge in parts of states and empires that are not easily accessible, hard

to militarily control, and/or with harsh living conditions. We can speak of insular majority settings. In sum, in national or imperial contexts, minorities can be determined both in numerical and in spatial/territorial terms. The geographical context factors into the categorization of groups as religious minorities.

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## Minorities within minorities

Labeling a group as a religious minority tends to encourage viewing it as a more or less coherent social entity with shared worldview, and fixed sets of behavior. However, these groups are rarely homogeneous, and attention should be paid to internal tensions, disputes, clashes, and power struggles that often are of an intersectional nature as they involve matters of gender and sex, class, ethnicity or race. In other words, attention should be paid to minorities within minorities.

When a group receives political recognition, it occurs often that those in power within the group or those who are favored by the recognizing political body, are invested with the power to represent the 'will' of the community, while internal minority voices are silenced. Power relations within religious minorities are thus also defined through the relationship of the group with the outside world. For instance, in her study of the Syrian Christians in Kerala, Sonja Thomas has noted how during protests in the late 1950s to secure minority rights, "'minority', a label that united all Christians [...] became an invented identity, one that was defined by dominant minority culture and created at the expense of subordinated lower-caste Christian and tribal minority communities" (Thomas 2018, 17).

The pressure of homogeneity can function as a line of defense, instinctive or strategic, against a majority. A typical result—although this is certainly not the universal rule—is that sexual difference, unusual social roles, and religious heterogeneity, especially if these are identified with the majority, can be experienced as threatening the very survival of the group.

It is therefore important to pay attention also to processes of minoritization happening inside religious minorities. For example, youth groups inside religious minorities may be in disagreement regarding social values and doctrinal matters but are in a powerless position vis-à-vis senior members. As a consequence, they may experience a condition of double minoritization, both internally and externally. This can also result in internal tensions and, especially in the case of second generation members in new religions, disaffiliation. LGBTQ+ groups inside religious minorities often find themselves in a condition of double marginalization, feeling that their sexual orientation is not accepted by their religious community and, at the same time, not feeling completely at ease in lay LGBTQ+ rights organizations.

Finally, attention to internal differentiations highlights power dynamics inside religious minorities. For example, when examining Buddhism in the United Kingdom, one should pay attention to differences in access to power and cultural capital between 'convert' Buddhists on the one hand, and 'diaspora' or 'heritage' Buddhists on the other, as well as between different Buddhist immigrant communities and different Buddhist denominations.

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## Diversity and ‘sects’: minor religions

Religious diversity in Muslim-ruled societies has not been limited to non-Muslim religious communities, and Islamic diversity has included a range of groupings that would today be categorized as religious minorities. Yet, rather than recognizing other varieties of Islam as minorities, Muslim political authorities have tended to reject these as heretics. Even a state like Turkey, which in article 2 of its constitution declares itself a “secular” (lâik) state, does not grant the Alevi the status of a recognized religious minority. In some cases, such as the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan, Muslim groups have been persecuted and their legitimacy denied.

The recognition of religious minorities can also lead to pressures to homogenize the majority. To take the example of Israel, its Orthodox rabbinate has, at the exclusion of for instance Reformed and Conservative rabbis, the monopoly over Jewish marriages, divorce, burial, and conversion. This homogenization process has also set in motion counter reactions, such as secular Jews calling for civil marriage or opting out of state-recognized Jewish marriage ceremonies altogether (Sezgin, 2010, 633, 645-651).

In fact, religious dissenters and nonconformists have often been more frowned upon and treated with greater degrees of suspicion and control than minorities that did not claim the same denominational belonging. For example, Jews enjoyed greater liberties than Protestants in certain parts of Catholic-ruled early modern Europe like, for example, Venice. Yet, the official recognition of certain religious minorities by states or empires often entailed only the recognition of a particular denomination or subgroup of these minorities and the exclusion of others.

Some of these varieties of religious differences—i.e., versions of Islam or Christianity—were, in earlier parlance, called ‘sects’. This term can either imply a religious value judgment (similar to ‘cult’ or ‘heresy’: see below) or, alternatively, be a more value-free typological device (e.g., when scholars call branches of Buddhist doctrine schools ‘sects’) or even a sociological descriptor in the sense of relative small groups that are spin-offs from a religious tradition. Sects, according to sociological typology, are characterized by stricter rules than the majority religion, rigid social boundaries, and doctrinal or behavioral particularities that set them visibly apart. Sects can be called minor split-off religions or be considered a type of religious minority. Adapting this latter term deemphasizes their genealogical relations with their respective parental religious tradition or their social features—a religious minority is a minority acknowledged as being (among other things) religious no matter its genealogy or relationship to its socio-religious environment.

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## Graded recognition and non-recognition

Classical Islamic legal-political theories operate with a two-tier system of religious minorities outside of Islam: (1) there are the traditions categorized as ahl al-dhimma—mainly limited to the religions Islamic regimes acknowledge as possessors of pre-Islamic scripture, ahl al-kitab, especially some indigenous religious communities—and (2) the

rest (typically classified as ‘polytheists’). While the former are tolerated, the status of the latter is more precarious. For example, a country like the Islamic Republic of Iran grants privileges to some religions but not to others by assigning a constitutional role to one version of Islam. Also countries outside the Islamic legal sphere have two-tier systems of recognition of religions, but, in these cases, explicit classifications build on non-religious criteria, such as imposing a minimum number of members or a minimum number of years of existence. Even though these criteria do not use religious language, they tend to benefit established religions, like in Russia or Austria. Even without constitutional or other legal restrictions, social or cultural factors can play into depriving groups that seek to define their identities in religious terms of this desired recognition. For example, widespread racism stands in the way of accepting the aspirations of Afro-Caribbean religions (Boaz 2021), and since 2001, prevention of ‘extremism’ or ‘terrorism’ has been used in different parts of the world as a non-religious code that targets religious groups, in particular Muslims.

Moreover, recognition of religious minorities and their religious commitments is based on what governments, representing particular religious cultures, qualify as ‘religious’. Protestant-dominated cultures have excluded practices that are not clearly related to ‘official’ doctrine commitment—such as with the 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance controversy in the United States over whether Native American traditional practices were religious or not (e.g. Wenger 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa, practices of traditional African religions are often dismissed as ‘cultural’ rather than as ‘religious’ (Hackett 2015, 92), framed as witchcraft (e.g. Tebbe 2007), or restricted for reasons of ‘public morality’ or ‘public health’ (e.g. Mutua 1999, 177–78). Moreover, there is also the category of ‘pseudo-religions’ or ‘quasi religions’ that has been leveled against new religious formations, especially those that challenge normative or traditional models of religion, denying them the status of ‘real’ religions. During the colonial Japanese rule over Korea, the Government-General of Korea introduced in 1915 this category of ‘pseudo-religion’ as a legal category, which, even though no longer in use, can still impact current evaluations of minority religions (Grisafi 2021).

In the case of Japan, although there is no legal terminology for minority religions, following the end of World War II, the term ‘new religions’ (shinshūkyō) has been used to indicate a variety of groups that are seen as different from ‘established religions’ (kisei shūkyō), namely Buddhist schools and Shinto temples and practices. The term was initially introduced by the newly formed Federation of New Religious Organisations of Japan (Shinshuren) as a response to pejorative terminology such as ‘pseudo-religions’ (ruiji shūkyō) and ‘heresies’ (jakyō) (Ketelaar 1993, 42; Dorman 2012, 25). These terms had been used since the Meiji period (1868–1912) to indicate minority practices and groups perceived as superstitious, marginal and a potential threat to cultural identity or religious orthodoxy. While derogatory terms such as ‘pseudo-religions’ are no longer used in the public discourse or in the media, the term ‘cult’ (karuto) has been used especially since 1995, after the sarin gas attack in 1995 perpetrated by members of the religious group Aum Shinrikyō in Tokyo, to label groups that are seen as dangerous, fraudulent, and not ‘proper’ religion—cases of what we labeled above as ‘wild minorities.’ Groups referred to as ‘new religions’ have also started feeling less at ease with the terminology both because it still implies a negative nuance of marginality, and because some of them are now over two hundred years old and do not see themselves as ‘new’ groups anymore (Baffelli and

Reader 2019). In China since 1912, religious policies have operated with the distinction between religion (*zongjiao*) and superstition (*mixin*). The former is seen as acceptable and granted religious freedom and the latter to be condemned (Goossaert 2005).

While the use of pejorative language to indicate religious minorities reduces such groups' legitimacy as a religion and increases their marginal status, religious minorities sometimes internalize and use negative terms (such as 'cult') to distinguish themselves from other groups perceived as different or potential threat to society. Being recognised legally or otherwise as a 'legitimate' (and therefore 'proper') religion is, more often than not, crucial for the survival of religious organizations, and this sometimes implies attempts at delegitimizing other groups.

Even in such countries that only impose 'soft' (implicit) and 'open' (negotiable) distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate religion, those challenging or even rejecting traditional religion and developing alternative worldviews as forms of non-religion, now often called 'the secular,' have until fairly recently been met with fierce resistance. Since the nineteenth century, especially in the United States, several individuals who have disengaged from Christianity or Judaism sought to calibrate their alternative worldviews as new varieties of religion. In many cases, this was driven by the conviction that traditional forms of religion provided an erroneous, biased, or reductionist understanding of religion—for example, by focusing on transcendental powers rather than on this-worldly, immanentist, or ethical aspirations that support human flourishing. Claiming to have a religion, or organizing groups in ways that could seem to mimic traditional churches, was one strategy for obtaining equal rights in a society where 'freethinkers,' 'atheists' and other rejectors of religion were maligned and discriminated against. For most of the time, such new religious formations have remained marginal and short-lived, and their impact was more to serve as a foil and imagined threat for majoritarian forms of Christianity (Schmidt 2021). Yet, since the late twentieth century, in some countries like Norway, membership rates in humanist organizations that criticize traditional religions—in particular Christianity, but also Islam—have increased sharply; in Norway, Human-Etisk Forbund (Humanist Association) now operates as a kind of mainstream religious minority. Not only does the Humanist Association offer similar services, such as life-cycle rituals, which are grounded in a (humanist-secular) worldview that is imparted on participants who wish to attend a confirmation service, but it also has successfully applied to the government the reception of the same financial benefits as religious organizations and actively takes part in various interfaith activities. In the past decades, the notion of 'belief' has been added to that of 'religion' in human rights language. For example, article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights (drafted in 1950 and entered in force in 1953), establishes "the freedom to change a religion or belief, and to manifest a religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance, subject to certain restrictions that are "in accordance with law" and "necessary in a democratic society." This resonates with attempts in legal discourse to extend the range of phenomena classified as religion beyond official and traditional religion, beyond theism, and to also include atheism (see e.g. The Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights" General Comment No 22 from 1993). While communities sustaining and practicing any sort of belief could, in theory, fall under this protection clause so that one could speak of 'belief minorities,' in practice it seems that this step has not yet been taken and beliefs

not classified as 'religious' continue not to receive the same amount of attention. Humanist associations, however, are examples of the emerging societal prominence of organized non-religious beliefs.

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## Identification and markers

In many of the contextual settings we have touched upon so far, the identification of religious minorities and the recognition of people belonging to such groups is (or was) facilitated by markers such as dress, food, language, material and performative culture, aesthetic sensibilities and soundscapes, or dominant forms of occupation. These markers can create tensions and they are often employed in strategies of exclusion. The case of Muslims minorities provides ample illustration: Non-Muslims have contended audible liturgical sounds to be undesirable and threatening, and visible parts of Muslim buildings as disturbing. They have objected to dietary rules in the name of animal rights or vegetarianism, and opposed Muslim clothing chosen to signal piety as potentially dangerous for public order or violating women rights, and so on. Yet, the removal of identity markers, which has frequently accompanied processes of modernization and emancipation of religious minorities, often results in new forms of suspicion and discrimination of religious minorities. Making markers invisible, as the history of modern antisemitism suggests, does not erase perceived differences. However, it needs to be remembered that norms about such markers were not always enforced, or only enforced under certain circumstances as serving specific interests (see Weltecke 2020, 30–31).

In several cases, membership in minority groups is regulated by rules of endogamy that are self-imposed and/or imposed from the outside; marriages across religious boundaries (aka intermarriage) has not been the norm throughout history. For instance, in countries dominated by Islamic legal traditions, marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men were (and in many countries still are) not allowed. However, in practice, such unions have become more common, often resulting in pro-forma conversions by non-Muslim men who wish to marry a Muslim woman. For non-ahl al-dhimmi people, the rule is that the non-Muslim partner must convert to Islam and thereby cease to be a member of her previous religious community. In the case of female converts, this constitutes an additional cause for concern to the extent that it can potentially weaken the reproductive power of the minority group they previously belonged to by losing the children mothered by these women. Intermarriage is an important transgression of religious boundaries that are vigilantly monitored. Whether based in reality or not, rumors about the abduction of minority women by men belonging to the majority are common among minorities in Islamic societies (e.g. in Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan), revealing not only the vulnerability of the minority but serving also as an instructive example of the gendered nature of majority-minority relations.

Gender and minority markers intersect in some European countries, where it is the female veil and not the male prayer cap that ignites controversy. Other key transgressions that spark conflict are proselytization and conversion. In India, for example, resistance against this practice has gone so far that anti-conversion legislation has been passed in several Indian states (see Jenkins 2019; see also Hackett 2008 for controversies on proselytization in Nigeria).



While endogamy and markers are characteristic of many minority religions, we do not consider these defining features of religious minorities. Endogamy is not a universal trait of religious minorities and, especially in modern societies, membership in religious minorities is typically not perceivable by the markers mentioned above. Where such markers appear, they tend to index more total forms of religious commitment or groups that emphasize their difference, or even their exceptionality, to their environments.

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## Formation processes

As a classificatory taxon (category), religious minority belongs to the class of minorities. Kindred to religious minorities are ethnic, language, national, political, and sexual minorities—to only mention the currently most salient types. While these appear to be natural givens, speaking of assemblages or groups of people as minorities and assigning them distinct attributes associated with minorities is the outcome of historical processes. In other words, history comes into play three ways at minimum: (1) the emergence of the concept (e.g., ethnic minority tied to the concept of ethnicity, racial minorities to ideas of race, religious to the category religion), (2) the way their past is narrated, and (3) the events that are being admitted as facts and that are conceptualized and narrated. In other words, assemblages of people now not regarded as minorities can receive that label in the future. For example, specific age groups that are subject to different treatment and also often amount to smaller numbers in most populations—children and seniors—are as yet not typically conceived of as minorities, probably because people in the course of their lives necessarily migrate from minority to majority and back to minority status. Humans that have not yet been accorded the rights of adults are called ‘minors’ in English, indicating semantic ties with ‘minority.’ The emergence of the term ‘agism’ (or ageism) to capture age-related stereotypes and discrimination could show that specific age groups in the future might conceptualize themselves as minorities, at least as lesser numbers in a population and in terms of power imbalances as key features of minorities.

For aggregations of people that share social positions or interests to acquire the status of minorities, they need to make conscious and strategic classificatory and organizational efforts that manage to mobilize people around such an issue. They will make such efforts if they consider the issue in question important for their lives and the difference with the majority significant. Self-consciousness and awareness of being a minority is therefore a typical trait of minorities, a “subjective condition” (Oran 2021, 3).

For example, since the 1960s, we have seen the emergence of the term ‘sexual minorities’ as an umbrella term covering people who share sexual identities, practices, or preferences that are different from those of the majority; this deviance is perceived as socially significant as their identities, practices, and preferences suffer from rejection, criminalization, demonization, and/or pathologization, resulting in discrimination, hatred, and violence. The emergence of the concept of ‘sexual minorities’ does work similar to ‘religious minorities.’ Three similarities are worth pointing out. First, both concepts provide an umbrella for phenomena that earlier on were seen as distinct; homosexuals and transgender people were not necessarily perceived as belonging to the same group, just as, for example, Jews and Bahais were, for a long time, not considered under the same classification. Second, both concepts can serve as terms of legal

empowerment, as fighting for their recognition and rights. Third, sexuality or religion are considered central to peoples' identities so that an increasing number of them engage in activism.

Religious minorities can also be formed through reclassification as a form of abstraction. With the example of Judaism, we have seen that while Jews were long treated as a specific and exceptional case rather than as an exemplar of an as yet non-existent category, they eventually became a prototypical example of a religious minority. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, Jews in Western Europe and the United States campaigned on behalf of their people in East Europe. Jews were also key actors in the emerging minority protection discourse (Fink 2004).

We can speak of a double process of reclassification and abstraction. Due to increasing knowledge about other parts of the world, travel, and migration, the list of groups that potentially qualified for classification as 'religious minorities' grew longer; from a brief list of prototypical examples restricted in time and space, 'religious minorities' became an abstract category with universal applicability. Newly labeled religious minorities, such as the Jewish 'minority,' were reclassified from terms such as nations or nationalities, corporations, people, laws, or schools, which had been common descriptors for social formations where religion played a role. With the emergence of nationalism and the spread of the national state as the dominant model of political systems, this terminology was toned down and replaced with that of 'religious minorities.' Moreover, what previously were single entities, such as Jews, Muslims, Christians, were abstracted into the previously non-existent class of 'religious minorities.'

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## What makes minorities 'religious': denials, genealogies and typical features

While the concept 'sexual minority' revolves around sexuality, 'religious minority' constructs a semantic relationship of a group to the qualifier 'religious.' As we have seen above, the label of 'religion' can be denied, for instance, by reference to language such as 'pseudo-religions' or 'cults.' Even though this latter term sometimes surfaces in scholarship, it carries negative connotations in many contexts. In fact, there is evidence that religions publicly classified as cults suffer higher degrees of discrimination by governments than others (Peretz and Fox 2021). The term has also been adopted in non-European languages. For example, the word is rendered as *keolteu* in Korean script, and as *karuto* in Japanese, to discredit religious groups by making them appear as a social problem (Grisafi 2021, 51; Reader 2015).

Moreover, as previously addressed, the qualifier 'religious' is never alone, but is most often intersectional; 'ethnic' minorities can also be classified as 'religious' minorities and any such classification is done with specific strategic interests in mind. But not all groups appreciate being labeled as a 'religious minority'; they may reject both being labeled as 'minority' or as 'religious.' For example, some branches of modern Judaism refuse to consider Jewishness as a religion (see e.g. on Australian Jewry Creese 2019, 79 ). Likewise, many religious minorities resist the emphasis on religious difference and/or of minority status because both can generate tension with majorities.

The classification 'religious' for certain minorities has historically come with certain agendas. For example, European powers sought to intervene in favor of Christian churches in the Ottoman Empire—and these churches were, next to the Eastern European Jews, prototypes for the nascent category of 'religious minorities.' Moreover, given that religious freedom features prominently in the list of human rights (see below), categorizing institutions or practices as 'religious' can give a plausible claim for their inviolability. In Japan, for instance, legal registration as a 'religious corporation,' although not compulsory, allows religious organizations to obtain tax exemptions. Similar benefits are offered in many countries—and they can be of crucial importance for minor groups.

Many religious minorities are groups whose identities are recognized by their relation to a given religious tradition (thereby once again pointing to the relational character of the category). To begin with, this refers to the now publicly acknowledged canon of religions built around the notion of 'world religions'—i.e., a group that claims for itself to be Christian, Muslim, etc. and that finds itself in a minority position in society. More dominant religions would thereby potentially qualify as a religious minority. This claim of belonging can also be disputed, for instance when others consider a group merely a sect, a deviation ('heterodoxy') or as 'not really' belonging to Christianity, Islam, etc. Mormons, for example, are often not considered 'real' Christians and Alevi not 'real' Muslims.

Other religious minorities are precisely such religions that are not part of the so-called world religions canon, with Judaism being a contested case. While this is the case for several groups with premodern trajectories, many new religions (or New Religious Movements) have or claim genealogies that tie them to well-established major religions, or derive inspiration and vocabulary from one or more of these traditions. Religions that have been created in the modern and contemporary periods, however, tend to be classified as distinct phenomena and labeled with the categories new religions, new religious movements, minor religions (Nagaoka 2020), marginal religions (Grisafi 2021), or cults. This is problematic, for there is no fundamental difference between new religious minorities and classical examples of religious minorities in terms of minor numbers, power imbalance, minority awareness, claims for recognition, and sometimes even density/insularity and distinctness as expressed by markers. Yet, the label 'religious minority,' 'minor' or 'minority religion' has not been dominant in scholarship on so-called New Religious Movements, maybe so as not to confound it with the study of pre-modern religions.<sup>[8]</sup>

While many of these modern groups have sought recognition as religion, few if any have presented themselves as modern day religious minorities.

Classification as 'religion' also invokes common associations with the category 'religion.' The more something resembles generally acknowledged examples of religion, the more likely it is religion. Even in the United States, which is characterized by diversity and competition and has no official preferred religion, there are normative models grounded in the history of the country of what counts as religion, with as result that some religious groups do not fit in these models. In an intersectional manner such models also draw on structural racism (Boaz 2021).

Groups that aim to be recognized as religions, routinely emphasize features that match such prototypical models. They often do so by invoking a more abstract language with terms that are not specific to particular traditions, such as scripture, specialists or

priesthood, rituals, transcendence, the supernatural, cosmology, or liberation. Additionally, terms like beliefs, revelation or salvation, which have a more straightforward resonance with Christianity and Islam, are deeply ingrained as presumed characteristic features of religion. Minority groups whose identity formations can therefore be described in these terms have a good chance of being classified as 'religious.' As seen above, some protagonists have sought to re-conceptualize religion in humanist-immanentist-naturalist manners, but it will likely take time for such an understanding of religion to gain currency, if at all.

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## Religious minorities as problem in international politics

Religious minorities have initially been the main mover in the direction of minority protection (Ghanea 2012, 57). Minorities and religious minorities became prominent issues in international politics by way of international treaties between European powers and, in particular, through treaties imposed by European powers on the Ottoman Empire and nascent countries in Eastern Europe. Yet, the concept of minorities existed before the term became common. For example, the so-called Treaty of Berlin (1878) was concerned with combating social exclusion on religious grounds in the name of a "complete equality of rights and prerogatives." Even if these demands were made on behalf of minorities residing in or interacting with the Ottoman Empire—mainly Christians—the term 'minority' does not occur in this document. It first became current in a series of peace treaties following World War I. These treaties, starting with the one signed between the Allied Powers and Poland in 1919 that served as a template for most other treaties, promote freedom of religion for all inhabitants and equal treatment of racial, religious, and linguistic minorities. Their protection, now vested in the League of Nations, is dealt with as a matter of great urgency, and failing to provide it is considered a breach of contract. This discourse brings some inherent paradoxes to the fore: The treaties sought to provide access to wider society for people from minorities but also gave minorities the opportunity to stay aloof from majority society. While claiming access and protection, the treaties also offered opportunities for autonomy by granting minorities institutional independence from the state (as long as the state does not have to bear the costs)—for example, by granting them the right to establish, manage and control educational institutions. These facilities were meant to improve their well-being and to transmit their specific traditions to future generations. Even though the treaties mention three kinds of minorities—racial, religious, and linguistic—they give religious matters a more detailed attention, and thus give religion a particular significance.

At the heart of this international legal concept of minority, as Saba Mahmood points out, lies an "irresolvable tension" between equal partnership with the majority and its difference (religious or otherwise) from the majority as an "incipient threat to the identity of the nation that is grounded in the religious, linguistic, and cultural norms of the majority" (Mahmood 2016, 32). This is especially the case in countries with nationalist ideologies that stress homogeneity. When all members are subject to the laws of the nation state, this curtails the communal autonomy of minorities. Community members can even challenge rulings by their leadership by appealing to state laws, as individual Copts did during the Ottoman era when they appealed to sharia courts to bypass the Coptic church authorities (Mahmood 2016, 124). In several countries, personal law (including matters of marriage, divorce, succession, inheritance, or charities) is regulated according to alleged

traditions of religious minorities. This reflects a continuation of earlier times, where state law did not cover all realms of legal transaction and religious groups but ruled many aspects of their community members' lives without interference by the state,<sup>[9]</sup> and also a division of outer and inner public and private realms where religion, family, and sexuality are assigned to the private inner sphere, beyond the control of the nation state. Accordingly, "struggles over religion often unfold over the terrain of gender and sexuality" (Mahmood 2016, 114). In other countries, mainly in Western Europe where minority protection legislation was not enshrined, consolidation of the nation-state went against communal autonomy of religious minorities in the name of political, legal, and civil equality for all (Mahmood 2016, 122).

The treaty system, meant to protect religious minorities in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, was not a success. It collapsed some fifteen years after the Paris Conference, partly because of continuing dissatisfaction with the fact that the dominating Western powers never implemented minority rights in their own countries. After World War II, the international treaty regime was replaced by universal human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948, establishes the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" for "everyone" (Article 18). This wording covered a much wider range of subjects than the then established canon of minorities' rights. When finalizing the Declaration, it was decided to remove all references to minorities and minority rights (Lindkvist 2017, 174), partly because one major player, the United States, was against acknowledging a minority problem (Mahmood 2016, 58). In the end, the declaration does not once speak of minorities.

Yet, in 1947, the year before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was promulgated, the United Nations had formed a 12-member Sub Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities. Despite its name, but in line with the new focus on individual persons rather than on groups, this Sub-Commission initially mainly focused on issues of discrimination rather than on minority issues (Capotorti 1979, 28, paragraph 126). One outcome of the work of this Sub-Commission, however, was the publication of Capotorti's influential Study on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (Capotorti 1979) and its widely cited definition of 'minority' is at the beginning of this essay. In 1999, this Sub-Commission was renamed the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. This once more reflects the shift of focus from minority questions to human rights in general.

In 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly; it came into force on 23 March 1976. This Covenant put minorities back on the main stage, even though the emphasis continued to be on individuals, not on groups (Ghanea 2012, 65). Article 27 reads:

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

Compared to the post-World War I formulations, 'ethnic' has replaced 'racial,' and 'culture' has emerged as a key term. Similar to the post-World War I situation, the fall of the Iron Curtain gave minority issues a new urgency, and on 18 December 1992, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. Despite the singling out of these types of minorities—where national is introduced as a synonym for ethnic—most articles of this Declaration speak of minorities in general. In this way, it is clear that the rights declared herein pertain to all minorities not only to the ones mentioned in the title. Article 2 rephrases article 27 of the CCCPR in an active manner: "shall not be denied the right" is substituted by "have the right." Article 1 makes it the states' duties to

protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

This wording shows that identity has now assumed a key importance; it is not the mere existence of groups that needs to be protected but also minorities' identities. The statement also reflects the intersectional nature of minorities (see above) insofar as the distinctive characteristics of few minorities can be captured by one of the categories listed here only. It is remarkable that the text does not come up with the common restrictive phrasing referring to "public order and public morals" that pervaded the minority treatises and can still be found in many religious freedom guarantees in national constitutions. The Declaration does not provide an explicit definition of what constitutes a minority, but the implicit one is that minorities are endangered identities that are in need of protection by states and the international community of states. Minorities are vulnerable, but their identities are worth promoting. This identity-promotion was enshrined in the heritage discourse, which celebrates minorities as a form of cultural heritage. There is now a tension between protection and promotion that provides a new dimension to the minority problem, in addition to the ones highlighted above (equality vs. liberty, inclusion vs. independence).

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## Why religious minorities matter

As should be clear by now, religious minorities and the processes of minoritization from which they cannot be understood separately, are complex subjects to define, conceptualize, and categorize. Religious minorities and processes of minoritization are also profoundly important subjects to focus on not just for academic research but also for the wider society.

First of all, religious minorities are not survivors of a historical time that ended with the birth of the nation state. On the contrary, as discussed above, labeling groups as religious minorities is often a byproduct of the formation of nation states. Moreover, the increasing movement of people in a globalizing world results in the proliferation of minorities across borders, sometimes in global networks of diasporic interconnectivities, financial support, and shared identities. It is therefore crucial to understand how religious minorities, new and old, relate to the social settings around them and how they are "part of and co-shaped by their wider societies" (Østebø and Pontzen 2022, 116).

Studying religious minorities also means exploring social, religious, and political fault lines in nation states, multination states, or political unions. By studying minoritization (in religious but also other terms) as a general process or of a specific group in particular geographical and temporal settings, one can uncover frictions, processes of domination, subversion, and self-assertion that are pervasive throughout large scale-societies, yet less visible the further one moves away from these fault lines. Studying religious minorities and minoritization can therefore reveal deep-seated values, sensibilities, assumptions, and social processes and practices that are taken for granted in terms of 'true,' 'just,' 'normal,' 'authentic,' and so on. Religious minorities' ascribed, observed, or self-proclaimed otherness and the religious minoritization of groups often make these assumed truths and their conflict with other truths explicit, such as is the case in many conflicts surrounding multiculturalism and the preferences (for instance of dress) of members of religious minorities in Europe (e.g. Laine, 2014, 217-27). Thus, by studying the marked category of religious minorities one realizes unmarked categories made in society. Studying Jews in medieval Christian Europe, to take one example, will show aspects of medieval European society that studying medieval Christians alone would not do as easily.

There are also certain themes for which a focus on religious minorities can be particularly relevant. In addition to the more obvious subjects such as marginalization, discrimination, and multiculturalism, zeroing in on religious minorities can offer fresh perspectives on subject areas that suffer from assumed homogeneity and those which are embedded in universalist claims. Examples of the first are fundamental values and assumptions of secular nation states and national systems of civil law that without the presence of social groups that do not share them appear 'given' and 'natural.' An example of the second are human rights, which, although the aim has always been for all of humanity to benefit from them, are rooted in particular Western modern individualistic values that often are in conflict with those of (often non-Western) collectives such as religious minorities.

Moreover, social processes characteristically taking place in relation to religious minorities such as adaptation, rejection, (self-)censoring, and opposition, may produce new doctrinal understandings and new forms of religious practices, both in religious majorities and religious minorities. For example, in Christian history, heresiology has served an important role in the development of Christian doctrine, or has even been, as Daniel Boyarin claims, the means through which Christianity became a distinct religion (Boyarin 2004). The 'othering' dialectics of religious minorities and majorities arguably constitutes an important conduit of religious formation and innovation.

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## Footnotes

**1**  
For a discussion about minoritization see also Laurie and Khan (2017).

2

See also Helge Årsheim writing on the Nordic countries: “By providing minorities with different avenues and frames of reference for the formulation of their claims [...], lawmakers and the judiciary invite introspective debates within minority communities regarding the self-perception of their religion” (Årsheim 2022, 376).

3

To complicate matters: Joanildo A. Burity has characterized minority claims for legal equality also as (an attempt to) minoritizing the majority because the majority’s social position as hegemonic is challenged. This, in return, often invokes reactions that minoritize the minority even more (Burity, 2016: 120). Yet, whether the de-hegemonization of a dominant (majority) religion is tantamount to its minoritization while no other majority emerges, is debatable.

4

One strategy to avoid problems with terms is to propose alternatives. Weltecke (2020, 15), for example, acknowledges that speaking of minorities can stabilize marginalization and that the terminology is considered derogatory by stakeholders, and therefore proposes to replace majorities/minorities by dominating vs. tolerated and non tolerated groups (“geduldet”/“nicht geduldet”). The concept of tolerance, however, works better for certain contexts than for others. Weltecke is a medieval historian, and her proposed terminology can fit the historical contexts she works on. Note, however, that the quality of being tolerated/not tolerated hardly works to characterize groups, since it neither indicates neither the extent nor aspects in which a non-tolerated group is not tolerated, both of which tend to vary considerably in different contexts and situations. Other alternatives are “marginal,” “fringe,” “unconventional,” “nontraditional,” “minor” religions or “special groups”, all of which have advantages and shortcomings.

5

Ghanea (2012, 59) argues that “racial minorities enjoy protections that religious minorities have almost totally been sidelined from.”

6

See White (2011, 49) for the same observation regarding French surveys of the Syrian population.

7

White (2011, 4) goes so far as to claim that “Minorities are integral to the development of modern nation-states, not awkward groups that do not properly fit into them.” White emphasizes the importance of representative government (the idea that the state claims to represent the people), of which democracy is only one form, as ideological legitimation for the emergence of the concept of minorities (29). Yet, the idea of ‘the people’ can be an instance of exclusion of minorities insofar as ‘the people’ often means ‘the majority of the population.’

8

In the last decade scholars in the field of New Religious Movements have started using the more neutral term ‘minority religions.’ This term encompasses a wider range of groups that do not fit (or have ceased to fit) the category of ‘new religious movements,’ such as Latter-Day Saints or Jehovah's Witnesses. INFORM, a UK-based charity providing



information about various religions, for example, was one of the first organizations to start using 'minority religions' instead of 'New Religious Movements.' George Chyssidis (1999) however argues that replacing 'new religious movements' with 'minority religions' raises a number of issues as the two terms do not necessarily coincide (some minority religions are not necessarily new religious movements, for example). For a critical discussion see Chyssidis (2000). For a discussion about terminology see Barker (2004); Bromley (2004); Melton (2004); Robbins (2005); Reader (2005).

9

Weltecke (2020, 24) puts it succinctly: "there was no equality before the law for everyone."

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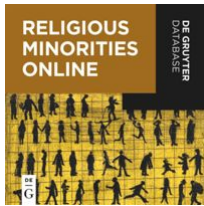
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