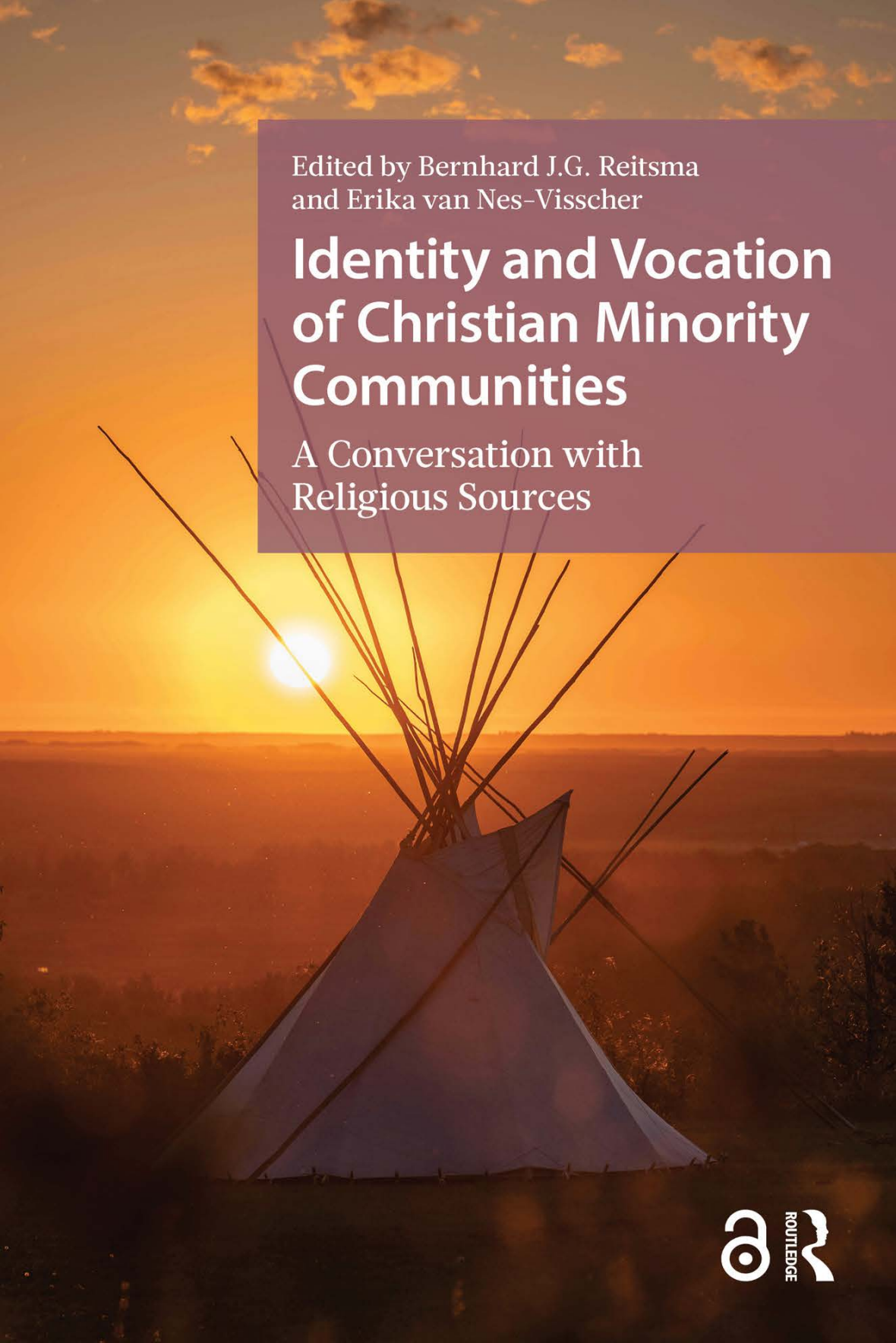




Edited by Bernhard J.G. Reitsma
and Erika van Nes-Visscher

Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority Communities

A Conversation with
Religious Sources

Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority Communities

What does it mean to be a Christian minority community, particularly in the context of Islam? That is the main question of this collection of high-quality academic contributions. Believers belonging to religious minority communities can struggle when it comes to defining their identity as part of the majority society while yet differing from that majority in various ways. It could also lead to the question as to how they might contribute positively to society, being in an often vulnerable position as minority. In this volume, the identity and vocation of the Church as a minority are addressed by different scholars, looking at a particular New Testament letter to a minority community (1 Peter) and engaging with different historical sources. The contribution of Jewish and Muslim scholars leads to an interesting conversation, since all monotheistic religions face similar challenges. The volume draws the themes together in two concluding chapters, the first written from a social-scientific perspective, the second from a theological-missiological perspective, that represent the key ideas emerging in addressing this important question.

Bernhard J.G. Reitsma is professor of Church and Theology with a special focus on Islam at the Protestant Theological University in Utrecht, the Netherlands, and head of the Graduate school. He is a minister with a special assignment in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

Erika van Nes-Visscher is a researcher connected to The Church in the Context of Islam Foundation.



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Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority Communities

A Conversation with Religious Sources

**Edited by
Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and
Erika van Nes-Visscher**

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1 The Church as Minority in the Context of Islam

Bernhard J.G. Reitsma

Abstract

In this contribution, the different aspects of the concept ‘minority’ and their complexity are introduced. The term ‘minority’ has different connotations, varying from basic numerical minority to the notion of ‘minoritization.’ The complexity is important for the research into the identity and vocation of the Christian Church in the context of Islam. This project starts from different readings of 1 Peter in relation to social identity (complexity) theories and then proceeds towards different Christian perspectives on ‘minority’ in conversations with Jewish, Sunni, and Shi’a contributions. In all of this, the perspectives of Muslim Background Believers are emphasized. As the embodiment of what it means to be a minority, their position is of great value in relation to the questions of identity and vocation.

Keywords: religious minority, minoritization, power, liminality, Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), 1 Peter

Introduction: Religious Minority

Is it possible to be religiously exclusive and socially inclusive? That was the central question posed by the first volume of research published by the Chair of the Church in the context of Islam.¹ If we take the written sources of the holy books of Christianity and Islam seriously, can we live and work together for the common good of our societies when we substantially differ in our religious views of what that common good is? What if one considers the other’s worldview not simply as erroneous but as truly dangerous to society or even as evil? This volume follows on from one of the conclusions drawn in response to those questions, namely that the answer depends very much on the context in which the question is posed. The dynamic between religiously exclusive faith and socially inclusive living differs from one situation to another. It very much depends on the position and the

1 See Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, Erika van Nes-Visscher, eds., *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023).

2 Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority

numbers of people belonging to different communities, their power, and the kind of society in which they are living. In states where the rule of law is respected, as a matter of principle all citizens have equal rights and privileges, no matter their religion or social affiliation. This is true for even the smallest minority group. It does not automatically guarantee that people are always treated equally. A report in the Netherlands has shown that Muslims are discriminated against more than other groups, and the Black Lives Matter movement has also highlighted the unequal treatment experienced by particular communities, especially regarding issues of justice.² However, acknowledging this, the legal guarantee of equality still means the dynamics are different from situations where there is no rule of law.³ In all of this, it also depends on what is considered to be the common good that the rule of law is protecting. It could be the case, for instance, that in certain countries religious minorities are not protected by the rule of law, but excluded exactly because of it, if the laws do not permit religious diversity. In other more community-oriented societies, where honour and shame are important factors, the situation is completely different again. In many areas, there is not just one minority, but often a complexity of different smaller or larger communities. All of which leads to different power dynamics.

When social and economic power structures determine the rights and privileges of different communities, minorities are much more vulnerable than majorities, can easily become marginalized, and are dependent on the majority for social inclusion. In case of conflicting perspectives on the common good for society, the minority often has no choice but to go with the dominant perspective in public, even when they would hold to their own beliefs in private. That can lead to confusion about position and identity. In general, a simplistic dichotomy between majority and minority will not do and oversimplifies pluralist societies. Power is not held by a singular majority, but by competing interest groups and all these groups have things in common with the rest of society, but also essential differences that make the subgroup distinct.⁴

2 In the Netherlands, for instance, people with names that betray a migrant or Islamic background are more often ignored in job applications than people with Dutch names (see *Eindrapport nationaal onderzoek moslimdiscriminatie* [Endreport of the National Inquiry into the Discrimination of Muslims], <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/fdd725d2-7630-4b79-9bab-606d6c1c147f/file> (accessed 1 May 2025). See also Najib Tuzani, “Waarom het woord integratie zoveel pijn doet,” *Trouw* 30 November 2024, 28, 29; and “De motie-Becker tast het fundament aan van wat we als samenleving willen,” *De Volkskrant*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/ws-ba52af27/>.

3 Of course, that does not mean there are no boundaries. Inclusion is only possible if everything that threatens the rule of law is excluded. Ultimate evil cannot be included, although Derrida would even accept this option as part of hospitality.

4 See Chapter 4 of this current volume by Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Being a Christian Minority and Creating a Soft Difference.”

The Christian Church as a Minority in the Context of Islam

The position as a minority in often complex societies describes very well the experience of many Christian communities in Muslim-majority countries.⁵ In different parts of Central Asia, Indonesia, northern Africa, and the Middle East, the Christian community is present as a numerical minority amidst a majority of Muslims, even when in absolute numbers there are substantial Christian communities in, for instance, Egypt and Lebanon. This leads to specific challenges for the church and theology, living, working, and reflecting from the margins of society. Of course, the intensity of the challenges has differed over time and across contexts, depending on the quality of the relationships between Christians and Muslims and on the power dynamics.⁶ Still, as minorities, the situation of many Christians in the Islamic world is marked by uncertainty. According to human rights organizations, Christians are experiencing rejection, alienation, discrimination, harassment, outright persecution, and even death.⁷ Even though they can be full citizens of their country, they are still regularly considered strangers. Kar Yong Lim, for instance, speaks about social hostility, strangeness, alienation, and being labelled as infidel (see Chapter 2). Since Lim is also of Chinese descent and therefore part of a double minority in Malaysia, the situation is even more complicated.

The question is if this experience of Christians in Muslim majority contexts is due to Islam or that it is a general dynamic in communities. That discussion is still ongoing, but it is clear that different Muslim minority communities also face similar issues in countries with Hindu or Buddhist majorities, like India and Myanmar, and to a different extent also in modern Europe. That justifies research into the meaning of being a religious minority in the context of a different religious majority.

5 See, e.g., George Sabra, “Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim context of the Middle East,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.1 (2006): 43–53, who describes – slightly generalizing – two different ways that Christians try to shape their identity in the Middle East, both coming from the fact that Christians are a minority and vulnerable. In different ways Christians in other Muslim-majority countries experience similar tensions.

6 Cf. Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 4; David Thomas, ed., *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslims Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018). In general, it seems that in Andalusia under Umayyad rule (756–1492 CE) and in Baghdad during the Abbasid reign (750–1258 CE) there was more positive interaction and cooperation, while in other time periods relationships were much more strained.

7 See e.g. Open Doors International “World Watch List 2026,” listing eight countries with an Islamic majority in the top ten countries where Christians are persecuted most. A ninth country, Eritrea, does have a large Muslim community, though here we have mainly state persecution of those communities that are not officially recognized by the government. “World Watch List 2026,” Open Doors, <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/> (accessed 26 March 2026). See also different reports of Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/> (accessed 26 March 2026). Amnesty tends to emphasize in their annual reports that persecuted communities often are a minority within society.

4 *Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority*

In this volume we therefore explore the situation of the Christian community as a minority in the context of Islam. Two elements stand out in that context. First, as mentioned, the question of identity surfaces over and over again. If Christians are part of their society and ethnic community and at the same time of the worldwide Christian community, what defines them the most? What is their true identity when they are socially marginalized, yet still legally and civically full citizens of society? Secondly, the question of calling arises. What can this community contribute to the wider society from its defined identity? What if there is no real influence through political or economic (or military) power? How does the Christian community then define its calling? What if there are different minority groups in society? In the background of 'identity and calling' there is always the reality of persecution and suffering, since minorities are vulnerable to oppression and persecution.

Defining Minority

First of all, we need to clarify what exactly we are talking about in discussing the Christian community as a minority. For although it seems obvious that a minority is a group of people who are 'numerically inferior to the rest of the population' and who 'show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture traditions, religion or language,'⁸ there is much more to it than simply numbers. We can also not equate minorities with having no power or influence. The following connotations and features need to be taken into consideration, focusing in this context on the meaning of religious minority.

Numerical Minority

The first and obvious meaning of 'minority' is indeed the fact that a religious group is small in numbers. In essence, what we are describing here is an objective statistical fact, with no value attached. Nevertheless, it can be quite complex. Although formally a (religious) minority consists of less than 50% of the society, when there are many different religious communities, a group consisting of 40% of the population can still be the largest community. Moreover, there are always other features involved, not just the religious aspect; for instance, political affiliation, gender, social status, ethnicity, and other cultural aspects. Sometimes these features resonate with the numerical aspect. The religious minority can also be an ethnic minority, as in the case of Filipino Christians in Saudi Arabia or Muslims with a Moroccan background in the Netherlands. However, a religious minority can ethnically belong to the majority as well, as for instance with Coptic Christians in Egypt, Protestant Christians in Turkey, Evangelical Christians in Armenia,

8 From the definition developed by Francesco Capototi, special rapporteur of the United Nations sub-commission on prevention of discrimination and protection of minorities, *Study on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (New York: United Nations, 1979); also see Chapter 10 of this current volume by Elias El Halabi, "Arab Christians: A Peculiar Minority Paradigm."

or Protestant and Evangelical Christians in Belgium. The same is true for other aspects, like political affiliation and social status.

In this numerical perspective, being a religious minority can speak of

- 1) A minority group, denomination, or movement within one religion, like the Amish community in Christianity or Shi'a believers within Islam.
- 2) A religious minority group in a region or country with one or more larger religious communities, like Christianity in Pakistan or Islam in Latin America. In most of these situations, there is usually more than one religious minority present, either of the same religion or of different religions. In Pakistan, there is among others the Ahmadiyya minority community alongside the Christian community; in many countries in the Middle East, both Eastern Orthodox and Evangelical communities are a minority among the majority of Muslims.
- 3) Religion as a minority group in a secular environment, where the majority is not affiliated with one religion, such as Christianity and Islam in France.

Minoritization

Apart from the numerical aspect, the characterization as minority can also be used with a specific value and perception. Martin Accad calls this 'minoritization.' Minoritization is the process by which a minority group is 'overtly, consciously, unjustly suppressed.'⁹ A minority is seen as of less value than the majority, as we can see for instance in the treatment of Filipino and Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East. This is different from *marginalization*, where groups are overlooked or ignored, but able and allowed to live in their own community.¹⁰ There are two sides to minoritization.

- 1) There is minoritization from the outside: the negative perception comes from the wider community towards the minority group. This is a socio-political and psychological process, which is intentional, viewing the other group as of less value than the majority community.¹¹ This usually has negative consequences for the position of this community in the wider society. We can see this when the Christian community is viewed by Muslims as *kafirs* (infidels) or second-class citizens. The idea of Christian and Jewish believers being *dhimmi*s can fit into this category.¹² Although Muslim scholars would argue that *dhimmitude* is not minoritization, but a pact that obligates Muslims to protect religious

9 Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87–98, 87.

10 Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87.

11 Cf. Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87, 88.

12 The concept of *dhimmi* refers to the social and legal status of the People of the Book (Ahl al-Kitāb, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) in Islam, who are considered a protected minority.

6 Identity and Vocation of Christian Minority

minorities – Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian – in an Islamic State,¹³ it could lead and has led to seeing and treating them as inferior.¹⁴

- 2) There is minoritization from the inside: the negative perception comes from the minority community itself. This can happen in situations where the minority group feels threatened, withdraws from the wider society, and develops a survival mentality. It is a form of victimization and self-defeating behaviour resulting from a sense of victimhood and inferiority.¹⁵ Minoritization from the inside is often intertwined with minoritization from the outside.

Dominance versus Subordination, Power versus Weakness

The situation of religious minorities becomes critical if religion (or the absence of religion in a secular context) becomes allied with power and dominance, for religion can become a justification for suppressing the rights of others.¹⁶ Religious minorities are in general considered the weaker party. Having the majority seems to imply a “state of domination,” regardless of whether this majority is numerically larger than other species, genders or even political groups.¹⁷ This is especially (but not only) the case in situations of minoritization. There are different kinds of dominance.

13 See Yaser Ellethy “Al-walā’ wa-l-barā’ (Loyalty and Disavowal): Reconstructing a ‘Creed’ in the Muslim Hermeneutics of ‘Otherness’,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, ed. Reitsma and Van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023), 151–166.

14 In general, this is reflected in the effects of what is termed the Pact of Umar, that seems to be more discriminating against Christians (and Jews) than the Medina charter; cf. Milka Levy-Rubin, “The Pact of ‘Umar’,” in *Routledge Handbook on Christian-Muslims Relations*, ed. Thomas (London: Routledge, 2018), 80–89. On the Medina Charter, see “Full text of the Medina Charter,” constitution.org, <https://constitution.org/1-Constitution/cons/medina/macharter.htm> (accessed 18 August 2025); cf. Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad’s Acts of Foundation of the ‘Umma’,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41.4 (2009): 555–575; Abdullah Moeed Al Shehri, *Universal Human Rights: A Comparative Study of the Charter of Medina and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (PhD diss., School of Humanities and Communication Arts Western Sydney University, August 2022). The Marrakesh declaration on the rights of religious minorities gives again a more modern perspective, see for the text, Ministère des Habous et des Affaires Islamiques, <https://habous.gov.ma/fr/annonce-et-activite/C3%A9s-minist%C3%A8re/3107-d%C3%A9claration-de-marrakech-les-droits-des-minorit%C3%A9s-religieuses-dans-le-monde-islamique-%C2%BB.html> (accessed 26 March 2026); cf. “Muslim Scholars Release Declaration on Rights of Religious Minorities,” World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/muslim-scholars-release-declaration-on-rights-of-religious-minorities> (accessed 26 March, 2026).

15 See Martin Accad, “Minoritization,” in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 94.

16 Cf. Martin Accad, “Minoritization,” in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 91–93.

17 Martin Accad, “Minoritization,” in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 91.

- 1) First, dominance can be political. Religious minorities can be subject to specific laws or regulations that govern their religious practices or limit their rights. In this case, they are part of the larger community but are framed through the lenses of the majority. This often implies that minorities have reduced power and influence in society, that they are not as well represented politically or legally. We can see this situation, for instance, in Iran, where Christians can never rise to higher social and political positions.

This situation can be externally motivated, for instance, by the mentioned dhimmi ideology. When the religious minority community is subordinated under the Islamic majority, it can not only lead to minoritization, but also to political, social, and legal suppression. It can, however, also be internally motivated. The Amish community, for instance, accepts a marginalized position forfeiting certain privileges and legal rights in correspondence with their worldview and ethos.

Being a numerical majority does not automatically lead to (political) dominance. Accad points to mosquitoes, that are a majority worldwide, but do not rule the world.¹⁸ There are many situations where the ethnic or cultural numerical minority is dominant over the majority. This was the case in Apartheid South Africa for many years, where the white minority dominated the black majority. In Jordan, a minority from Bedouin origins rules over a majority of Palestinians. This can also be true in relation to religion. Muslims did not have the majority in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region in the seventh and eighth centuries, but the Islamic rulers nevertheless dominated the area. In Iraq, the minority Sunni community ruled over the majority Shi'a community for many years, while in Syria a minority subgroup of Shi'a Islam dominated the majority of non-Shi'as. Other factors than just numbers play a role here, such as evaluative judgements of other groups as people in need of guidance, in need of colonization, for example, or as rightfully 'ruled over' as lower classes, or of themselves in terms of a minority or inferiority complex versus the majority complex.

- 2) Dominance can also be defined in cultural and social terms. A specific (religious) minority may have a distinct language or cultural practices and traditions that set them apart from the dominant religious group in a society. That does not have to lead to marginalization, but it could be an extra reason for marginalization, social disadvantages, discrimination, or violence. It could lead to restrictions in celebrating religious festivals or prescribed religious rituals. The Islamization of the Middle East did not happen only through forced conversions, suppression, or persecution, but also through social and cultural assimilation to the imposed culture over a longer period of time, the pressure

¹⁸ Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 91.

of the imposition of a specific minority tax, the so-called Jizya tax, which all led to conversions from Christianity to Islam.¹⁹

Superdiversity: The Minority Is the Majority

A very specific and challenging development is the reality of what today is called ‘superdiversity.’ This points to a situation in which there are no (religious) majorities at all. Here the majority has become the minority.²⁰ Each community, religiously and/or ethnically, is a minority within a complex community of diversity. There are situations in the major cities in the Netherlands and probably elsewhere too, where in schools no ethnic group and no religion has the majority. This is interesting, for it forces the students and teachers to negotiate together what kind of community they want to be, which kind of ideas and rules can play a role in their interaction. There is no dominant power to decide on that. At the same time, these kinds of contexts can be vulnerable to power plays and to the most dominant parties.

Other Related Concepts

When we look at the meaning of minority, there are two other concepts that are related to the ideas of being a minority.

- 1) First, there is the concept of marginality, that has been mentioned already. Marginalization is the reality in which groups are overlooked or ignored, but are nevertheless able and allowed to live in their own community.²¹ They are more or less left alone. Marginality assumes a structural separation between a dominant and a subordinate group in society. It can take the form of a ‘dehumanizing marginality’ when there is a dynamic of exclusion. Pat Brittenden, however, can also see a positive dynamic in a kind of ‘self-affirming marginality’ in which the subordinate communities are able to resist and be liberated from the domination of those at the centre, without becoming dominant themselves.²²

19 See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia— and How It Died* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 30–34, describing the different aspects of the triumph of Islam over Christianity in the Middle East.

20 See Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and its implications,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30.6 (2007): 1024–1054; Steven Vertovec, *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity* (London: Routledge, 2023); Dirk Geldof, *Superdiversity in the Heart of Europe: How Migration Changes our Society* (Leuven/Den Haag: Acco, 2016); M.R.J. Crul, J. Schneider, F. Lelie, *Super-diversity: A New Perspective on Integration* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2013).

21 Martin Accad, “Minoritization,” in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andrews (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87.

22 See Pat Brittenden, “Liberating Liminality in the Muslim-background Church of Algeria,” in *Between and Between Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouch and Michael McKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 37–53.

- 2) There is a final concept that will prove promising in this context, and that is the concept of liminality. The term liminality – from the Latin *limen*, threshold – describes an existence in between two realities in a process of transition. In anthropology, a liminal person is someone who exists in between two or more worlds, standing at the threshold between a previous identity, time, or community, and a new reality.²³ We will see further on that this concept is important in conversion situations, where people move from one religious identity to another. It also helps to describe the situation of religious groups that are stuck between the different worlds of their local and indigenous native identity on the one hand and their religious identity on the other.

These different aspects are present in the various contributions to this volume in different ways.

Core Topic and Research Question

Our core topic concerns the position of the Christian church as a *religious* minority in Islamic contexts. The concept of church is of course very diverse, but here we intend the Christian community as a theological concept that stands for a worldwide movement in many different forms. Our focus is on the question: What is the identity and the calling of the church as a religious minority in the context of Islam, with special attention to the reality of suffering in the background? Our approach is theological. The different connotations of ‘minority’ will help us to see the different dimensions to the topic. Is the church part of a religious minority and what does that imply? Is this minority minoritized, or is it accepted as an equal partner by the numerical majority? Is it part of a larger community of different minorities, perhaps even in a situation of superdiversity? What is the relationship of the minority to power and influence? Is this a suffering community and why? All these aspects are important elements when it comes to a theological evaluation and subsequent interpretation.

Sociology and Theology

The concept of ‘minority’ is a sociological concept. The same is true for marginality and liminality. These terms are not present in 1 Peter, which only speaks of strangers, aliens, or exiles. They are likewise not present in the wider biblical tradition. They do not seem to be aspects of older systematic theological discussions. That raises the question of what happens if we use a modern sociological concept in a theological discourse, on top of the danger of anachronistic use of concepts. Is it at all possible, or are we creating confusion by mixing different kinds

23 See Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909) and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1969). Groups and institutions can also be liminal.

of discourses? Does that change the content and meaning of these concepts, or does it change theology? Does it help our analysis or rather confuse it? Could it lead to theological justification for social realities or vice versa? Do we define the nature of the church in terms of sociological realities, and does that undermine the essence of the Christian community? Or does it help to define the identity and calling of the church as a numerical minority in the Islamic world? Could minority, marginality, or liminality be recognized as *notae (verae) ecclesiae*, (true) marks of the church, or even marks of the true church? A critical assessment of these concepts needs to be and will be part of the research that is presented in this volume.

Impact

We hope that this study will further the theological conversation concerning minority communities, but there is another aspect. This study also holds importance for a Western context in general. Even though there is no Muslim majority in the West, Christianity is declining here. That is a new experience. Generally speaking, for different periods in time, the church has to a certain extent been characterized by a majority position, both in terms of numbers and power and money. Mission has regularly been an expression of that position. The present reality is that Christianity has been shifting to the non-Western world for quite a while.²⁴ In North America, the same process is taking place, yet in a different way, for Christianity still has quite a degree of influence on politics through the Evangelical Christian support for the Republican Party, but is nevertheless declining. For the first time in centuries, the Church in Europe finds itself in a minority position, not in the context of an Islamic majority but of an increasingly secular society. Still, this leads to similar challenges as those faced by the Church in the context of a majority Islam.

When it is not, or no longer, possible to identify yourself in all things with the surrounding culture, identity becomes an issue. For monotheistic religions, to be fair, that issue was never limited to being in a minority position. The (possible) tension between being a loyal member of the religion and a faithful observer of the divine laws on the one hand and being a loyal member of society and observer of the state laws on the other has always been present. That is clear from Jesus' advice to give Caesar what is Caesar's and God what is God's (Matt. 22:21), from the issues of loyalty in the Constantinian era, and from modern challenges of Christians in minority situations. Still, the reality of a majority of non-Christians intensifies these tensions.

Approach

In approaching the question of identity and vocation of the Church as a minority in the context of Islam, the following points characterize our approach.

24 Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Sources

The focus on the identity and the calling of the Christian Church as a minority in the context of Islam leads naturally to the sources of the Christian tradition. The Scriptures of the New Testament are written by people who were part of a minority community in the Roman Empire and written to minority communities. We try to learn from this earliest Christian community that was a minority, both in the context of the Jewish people and in the Hellenistic multireligious Empire. From the collection of the New Testament, we have chosen our starting point in 1 Peter for a number of reasons.

First, 1 Peter especially addresses the challenges of a community that is a numerical minority. He calls them ‘exiles (παρεπίδημος) of the dispersion’ (διασπορά) (1 Pet. 1:1 NRSV), in a time of ‘exile’ (παροιμία) (1 Pet. 1:17 NRSV) and ‘aliens’ or ‘sojourners’ (παρεπίδημος) and exiles (πάροικος) (1 Pet. 2:11 NRSV). These words point to a similar condition that could be described with the different aspects of the concepts of minority, marginality, and liminality. In his letter, the author deals with the question of identity and responsibility. How should the Christian community that is under pressure behave as a minority in this world? In the background, the question of suffering is also constantly present, implicitly or explicitly. The community is ‘slandered’ (ESV) [καταλαλέω] and ‘reviled’ (ESV) [ἐπηρέάζω] (1 Pet. 3:16) and seems to experience something of what we have called minoritization. In many situations where Christian communities are a minority, they are vulnerable to oppression and deprivation. The same is true for different minority communities. Therefore, it seems valuable to look at this epistle as a starting point for understanding the Christian community as a minority in the context of Islam.

Secondly, the course Come Follow Me (CFM), designed by Tim Green specifically for teaching Muslims who have become followers of Jesus, is grounded in 1 Peter (see the discussion in Chapter 5). Since in this volume Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) are important participants in the research (see below), it makes good sense to investigate 1 Peter.

Social Science Perspectives

As stated before, the context in which we look at different challenges is obviously impacting our interpretation and response. Therefore, we will explicitly look at different texts and traditions with an awareness of the results of the social sciences. During the research on how to be religiously exclusive and socially inclusive, it became clear that religious perspectives on apostasy and how to respond to situations of exclusive belief in a social context are very much influenced by social identity and someone’s position within the social context. So, reading and interpreting 1 Peter on the questions of identity and calling as a minority are also influenced by social position. That is an important element in the reading of 1 Peter and in the rest of this publication, and Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Identity Complexity Theories (SICT) are central to that.

Different Historical and Christian Perspectives

One other aspect of the question of minority is that there are many different Christian traditions with completely different experiences and perceptions of this topic. The Western, Evangelical world has become used to being a majority, especially in the colonial era. Some would like to retain that position, either through mission projects or in reclaiming the world for Christianity, for instance in the so-called culture wars.²⁵ The Eastern Orthodox tradition also links the religious faith with specific areas and cultures, as seen in many Orthodox Churches that bear the name of their region – Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Syrian, Armenian, and others. Even though it is not possible to include all Christian traditions here, we have chosen two minority communities in the Middle East as exemplars to open up our perspectives on being a minority (see below).

Interreligious Conversation

Being a religious minority is not only a Christian but also a Jewish and Muslim experience. The Jewish diaspora community has experienced minoritization and discrimination in many parts of the world, with the Holocaust as the absolute abyss. Shi'a Islam has been a religious minority in Islam and has experienced suffering and discrimination in Sunni majority contexts. Sunni Muslims experience a quite new situation in the West, in being a minority in a growing secular environment. Christians, Muslims, and Jews have been both victims and victimizers of other religious minorities. Therefore, these are sensitive topics that we are dealing with. Because of the shared experience, we engage here in an academic conversation between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scholars. Even though this volume intends to draw conclusions for a Christian theology and the Christian community, we believe that as scholars we need to and can learn from each other and in that process clarify the challenges of being a religious minority and how to deal with this situation. This volume contributes to Christian theology, but we are convinced that the conversation can also enrich the Jewish and Islamic minority communities, and we encourage Jewish and Muslim scholars to draw their own conclusions from this research for their respective communities, theologies, and practices. Hugh Goddard emphasizes that for 'the future perhaps one of the most difficult issues for Christians and Muslims to face is that of religious minorities.'²⁶ He points out that the Muslim world discusses the question of whether it 'should move away from the classical concept of the Christian as dhimmi back towards the situation of much fuller equality and participation envisaged by the Constitution of Medina' or should revive 'the view of some medieval Muslim writers that Christians should be

25 See Peter Kreeft, *How to Win the Culture War: A Christian Battle Plan for a Society in Crisis* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); Mark A. Smith, *Secular Faith: How Culture Has Trumped Religion in American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

26 Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 188.

brought low and made to feel brought low.’ Will religion be the dominant factor in shaping Christianity and Islam, or will it be language and culture? And how will (Western) dominant non-Islamic communities treat minority Islamic presence?²⁷ The same can be said about Jewish minorities, their identity, and acceptance in the light of the historical reality of antisemitism. How does all of this relate to human rights?

Muslim Background Believers in Jesus Christ

Over the last 20–30 years we have witnessed a growing community of Muslims who have turned to Christ.²⁸ These believers in Jesus Christ with a Muslim background are people who acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Saviour and believe that he died and rose again, but who at the same time remain part of their family and their socio-religious community.²⁹ Their situation can be defined as a minority community par excellence. They are a minority in their previous community of Muslims. They do not belong to their spiritual heritage anymore, even though they might culturally and socially remain in their context.³⁰ At the same time, they are also a minority in the present Christian worldwide community. They often do not feel at home in the religious, spiritual, political, and societal environment of traditional Christianity. They often feel that, although connected with the worldwide Christian community, they cannot fully associate with it. In the Islamic world ‘Christianity’ stands for something quite different than in the West. In the West it simply points to people who believe in Jesus Christ, while in the Islamic world it refers to a system that is seen as ‘foreign.’ Christianity is identified with the West, which in turn

27 Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 188.

28 See, e.g., David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014); Thomas J. Walsh, “Longing for Family: Experiences of Converts from a Muslim Background and Challenges Facing the British Christian Community as it Welcomes Them” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023); Grant Francis Porter, “Church Planting Practices Among Muslim and Druze Communities in the Near East: A Conversation about Mission in the Light of the Early Church” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, 2018).

29 John Jay Travis, “Insider Movements: Coming to Terms with Terms,” in *Understanding Insider Movements. Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Harley Talman and John Jay Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 7–10; Joseph Cumming, “Muslim Followers of Jesus?,” in *Understanding Insider Movements. Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Talman and Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 25–30 (25). For a more extensive description of MBBs, see B.J.G. Reitsma, *A Clash of Civilizations Revisited: Kerk, Christelijke Theologie en Islam (Church, Christian Theology and Islam)*, Inaugural lecture 27 January 2025, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht, 10–15.

30 There is actually a great diversity among believers in Jesus with a Muslim background. Some do distance themselves completely from the Islamic community. Some are rejected by their community. This also depends partly on the context in which someone turns to Christ. In secular and individualistically oriented societies, this is different from more traditional, community-oriented societies, where there is less room for individual choices.

is experienced as the oppressor of Arabs and Muslims. It represents ‘anti-Islamic politics, polytheism and idolatry.’³¹ These new believers cannot accept all the cultural norms, values, and habits.³²

Besides that, MBBs are often disappointed in the Christian community for not being like a new family.³³ Sometimes they are even not accepted into the church, either because the local community in sensitive political situations does not trust their new allegiance, or because they represent a different cultural and religious environment, or both.

Being a double minority implies different challenges. First, it leads to struggles over identity. Being in a sense part of two worlds, living in a kind of liminal state, raises a central question concerning identity: ‘Where do we belong? Who are we?’³⁴ That accords with what we have seen so far concerning minority communities in majority contexts. This in turn leads to the question of what their calling is as believers living between two worlds.

Because of these different aspects, and especially their search for identity, researchers with an Islamic background who believe in Christ are part of the group of researchers in this project. They are the embodiment of what it means to be a minority, with all the challenges, confusion, and struggles, and therefore, they will offer a different contribution from Christian researchers with a traditional Christian background.

Vocabulary

We have chosen to use the term MBB in this project. This is only one way that this group is described. There are other terms, like Believers from a Muslim

31 Mazhar Mallouhi, “Comments on the Insider Movement,” in *Insider Movements*, ed. Talman and Travis, 109.

32 See B.J.G. Reitsma, *A Clash of Civilizations Revisited: Kerk, Christelijke Theologie en Islam (Church, Christian Theology and Islam)*, Inaugural lecture 27 January 2025, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht, 11–13, cf. Paul-Gordon Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths* (Plymouth: Cowley Publications, 2007), 109, 115; see also John Jay Travis and Dudley J. Woodberry, “When God’s Kingdom Grows like Yeast: Frequently Asked Questions about Jesus Movements within Muslim Communities,” in *Understanding Insider Movements. Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Talman, Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 31–39, (34): “‘Christian’ has an almost exclusively cultural, ethnic, or political meaning: Christians are either westerners (often seen as immoral) or members of local non-Muslim ethnic minorities.”

33 Thomas J. Walsh, “Longing for Family: Experiences of Converts from a Muslim Background and Challenges Facing the British Christian Community as it Welcomes Them” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 181,

34 B.J.G. Reitsma, *A Clash of Civilizations Revisited: Kerk, Christelijke Theologie en Islam (Church, Christian Theology and Islam)*, Inaugural lecture 27 January 2025, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht, 18, 19. Cf. Tim Green, “Identity Choices at the Border Zone,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library Publishing, 2013), 53–66; Cf. Tim Green, “Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. Greenlee (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library Publishing, 2013), 41–51.

Background. The right description would be: believers in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour with a Muslim background or MBBs in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Often people point out that Muslims are also believers, but there is a difference in what Muslims and MBBs believe about Jesus Christ. MBBs accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, that he was crucified and rose again, and that he is the Son of God. Muslims generally do not accept that. Because it is not practical to use the long version, we use the abbreviation MBB whenever we speak about this community.

To be sure, this is not the name Western theologians give to this group of believers, but it is used by these believers to identify themselves.³⁵

Content of the Volume

With all these observations in mind, the volume has been structured as follows. The first part (chapters 2–6) is devoted to a close reading of 1 Peter, first by Kar Yong Lim, from a double minority position as both Christian and Chinese in a Malaysian Muslim-majority context. That leads to interesting perspectives on identifying and strengthening the identity of Christian minority communities. Myriam Klinker-De Klerck then focuses on the reality of suffering in the light of honour and shame dynamics that are particularly present in collectivist communities and what that means for the calling of a minority Christian community in a non-Christian environment. Thirdly, Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok approach the theme of identity and calling from a SICT perspective and illustrate this with the reality of Abdelmasih's context as part of a Christian minority in the Egyptian Muslim-majority society.

Pat Brittenden and Parsa Zarin Ghalam are looking at the use of 1 Peter in the discipleship training material of the organization Word of Life, that focuses especially on MBBs, to see in what way 1 Peter is shaping the journey of MBBs. In that process, they explore the core challenges that MBBs face and how they are supported by the study of 1 Peter. In a similar way, Erika van Nes-Visscher analyses the results of different focus groups of minority Christians, both from Christian and Muslim Backgrounds, reading 1 Peter, revealing other nuances in being a minority.

The second part of this volume, chapters 7–13, is devoted to different historical perspectives from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. These contributions put the first part in a broader context and add to the multicoloured perspective of being a religious minority. Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman analyses two different

35 B.J.G. Reitsma, *A Clash of Civilizations Revisited: Kerk, Christelijke Theologie en Islam (Church, Christian Theology and Islam)*, Inaugural lecture 27 January 2025, Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Utrecht, 10; Mazhar Mallouhi, "Comments on the Insider Movement," in *Understanding Insider Movements. Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Talman and Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 109–115 (109); Ben Naja, "Jesus Movement: A Case Study from Eastern Africa," in *Understanding Insider Movements. Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, ed. Talman and Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 129–132 (130, 131).

interpretations of the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible from two Jewish minority groups in the diaspora, the *Targum Song of Songs* and the commentary of Yefet ben Eli. Jessica Roitman looks at the impact of the establishment of the State of Israel on the dynamic of being a Jewish minority in the context of complex historical developments.

Nathan Witkamp shows how a minority situation also impacts interreligious relations, in this case between Jewish and Christian minorities in the context of a Zoroastrian majority in fourth-century Persia. He presents Aphrahat's Christian view of Judaic religion in his *Demonstrations*. The dynamics of that conflictual situation shed another light on the question of identity, calling, and suffering of a Christian minority.

Elias El Halabi gives us an insight into the situation of (Greek) Orthodox Christians in the Middle East as a minority in the context of Islam, while Wilbert van Saane and George AlSahili do the same for the Protestant community in the region.

Finally, there are two contributions from Islamic traditions. Razi H. Qadir researches the Sunni Muslim perspective on being a minority, and Ahab Bdaiwi does the same for Shi'a Islam.

In the concluding part (chapters 14–15), Joke van Saane looks at the results of the contributions from a social scientific perspective, while Rahman Yakubu and Bernhard J.G. Reitsma draw conclusions from a theological perspective.

Part I

Being a Religious Minority

Perspectives on 1 Peter



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2 Reading 1 Peter in Constructing Minority Identity

Living as a Christian Minority in an Islamic Context

Kar Yong Lim

Abstract

1 Peter employs the label ‘Christian’ (1 Pet. 4:16) as a powerful self-designation in constructing the social identity of a minority Christ-believing community experiencing social prejudice due to their faith. By using group-identity vocabulary in 1 Pet. 2:9–10, this letter aims to provide a strong sense of solidarity for the readers and to instruct them to think and live differently from the prevailing social norms. By employing Social Identity Theory, specifically the strategy of social creativity, this contribution attempts to read 1 Peter from the perspective of a Christian minority living in a predominantly Islamic context, drawing insights for how to navigate their lives in the world without compromising their identity as the people of God.

Keywords: social identity, Christian minority, social prejudice, social creativity, positive group-identity, Christians in Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, and religions. With more than 60 different ethnic groups adhering to all major religious faiths, this country is a beautiful kaleidoscope of diversity with different colours, flavours, sounds, and sights reflecting the richness of cultures, traditions, and customs. Because of this, different groups strive to maintain their distinctive religious, ethnic, and cultural identities. Arising from this context, this contribution attempts to read 1 Peter from a Malaysian perspective. I am of Chinese descent (a significant ethnic minority) and also a Christian (a religious minority) living in a predominantly Islamic context.

I will explore how 1 Peter uses the term ‘Christian’ (χριστιανός, 1 Pet. 4:16), a powerful self-designation, in constructing the social identity of Christ-followers who lived as a minority in Anatolia in the first century CE. With at least 20 references to suffering in this short letter,¹ it highlights the anti-Christian

¹ See the section ‘Being Faithful in Suffering: 1 Pet. 2:19–20’ below for the references to the theme of suffering in 1 Peter.

hostility and persecution these believers encountered. Yet, the author of 1 Peter encourages Christ-followers to embrace the label of being called Christians by outsiders by thinking and living differently from the prevailing social norms and yet maintaining their identity as God's people in the midst of a hostile environment. Drawing from recent interests in the studies of social identity formation in Early Christianity and the notion of social creativity in reading 1 Peter,² I will also consider what this means for me as a Christian living as both an ethnic and religious minority in Malaysia.

Social Identity Theory and Social Creativity

I will employ Social Identity Theory (SIT) as part of the interpretative framework in examining how 1 Peter uses the label *χριστιανός* in constructing the social identity of the Anatolian Christ-followers. According to Henri Tajfel, the social identity process primarily involves three dimensions in establishing the ethos, values, status, and boundaries for a particular group over against other groups in a society – the cognitive, emotional, and evaluative dimensions.³ The cognitive dimension provides the group members with a strong sense of belonging and distinctiveness as compared to other groups. The emotional dimension brings various rituals and practices to enhance the emotional ties in group dynamics to establish a strong sense of solidarity, identity, and belonging to the group. The evaluative dimension deals with how the members within the group rate themselves in relation to other groups.

Social identity, derived from group membership, plays a crucial role in group behaviour where individuals strive to achieve or maintain a positive identity. When group identity is threatened or when social identity is perceived to be negative, group members will choose to leave their existing group and seek a group that provides a more positive social identity. If this choice is not possible, then group members will attempt to seek positive distinctiveness for the ingroup.⁴ This latter approach represents what Henri Tajfel and John Turner describe as a strategy of 'social creativity' where

group members may seek positive distinctiveness for the in-group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation. This need not involve any change in the group's actual social position or access to objective

2 For the use of social identity as a methodology in reading New Testament texts, see Coleman A. Baker and J. Brian Tucker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2014) and J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker, eds., *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

3 Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, European Monographs in Social Psychology, 14 (London: Academic Press, 1978), 28.

4 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47 (40).

resources in relation to the out-group. It is a group rather than individualistic strategy.⁵

According to Tajfel and Turner, social creativity can be achieved by adopting the following three strategies:⁶

- 1) Comparing the ingroup to the outgroup with new dimensions that are advantageous to the ingroup. For example, one may say, ‘We are poor, but we are happy.’
- 2) Changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group so that what was perceived to be negative is now perceived as positive. For example, one may say, ‘We are poor, but we are pious,’ or ‘We are poor, but we do not value material possessions.’
- 3) Changing the manner in which the outgroup is compared with the ingroup by ceasing or avoiding using certain attributes as a comparative term of reference. Alternatively, the ingroup may also compare themselves to other groups in a way that serves to enhance their positive distinctiveness. For example, one may say, ‘We are poor compared to Group A, but Group B is poorer than us.’

Further strategies have been identified in social creativity in subsequent research. One such strategy is to find a new point of reference in relation to time. For example, one may say, ‘We are poor, but we are better now compared to ten years ago.’⁷ This temporal comparison is a significant strategy in 1 Peter, as we will uncover later.

Rather than striving to improve the positive social identity of the ingroup through open hostility with or negative reactions to the outgroups who threatened members of the ingroup, social creativity is adopted to redefine and reinterpret intergroup comparison in a positive and favourable manner. We will examine how social creativity is used by the author of 1 Peter in using the label *χριστιανός* (1 Pet.

5 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 43.

6 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 43–44. See also Maarten Johannes van Bezouw, Joanneke van der Toorn, and Julia Christina Becker, “Social Creativity: Reviving A Social Identity Approach to Social Stability,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51 (2021): 409–422 (411), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2732>; and David M. Shaw, *Narrative, Calling, and Missional Identity in 1 Peter: Between Promise and Inheritance*, Biblical Interpretation Series 216; (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 43–44.

7 Mathias Blanz, Amélie Mummendey, Rosemarie Mielke, and Andreas Klink, “Responding to Negative Social Identity: A Taxonomy of Identity Management Strategies,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (1998): 697–729, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1099-0992\(199809/10\)28:5<697::AID-EJSP889>3.0.CO;2-%23](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199809/10)28:5<697::AID-EJSP889>3.0.CO;2-%23). See also the helpful table highlighting the overview of social creativity strategies in Maarten Johannes van Bezouw, Joanneke van der Toorn, and Julia Christina Becker, “Social Creativity: Reviving A Social Identity Approach to Social Stability,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 51 (2021): 409–422 (411), <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2732>.

4:16) as a powerful positive label in identity construction and how this is further given emphasis in 1 Pet. 2:9–20 where the Anatolian Christians are assured of their special status as God’s chosen, holy, and special people, rooted in the covenant he sealed with Israel.

The Use of ‘Christian’ as a Powerful Label in Constructing Social Identity in 1 Peter

The letter of 1 Peter⁸ identifies its audience as ‘the exiles of the dispersion’ (1 Pet. 1:1).⁹ Comprising a majority gentile audience scattered throughout the Anatolian Peninsula, the author employs the label *χριστιανός* (1 Pet. 4:16), commonly translated as ‘Christian,’ as a powerful self-designation in constructing the social identity of this Christ-believing community who experienced social prejudice as a minority in the Greco-Roman world.

Apart from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 11:26; 26:28), 1 Peter is the only other New Testament document that uses the term *χριστιανός* in labelling Christ-followers. This word appears only three times in the New Testament. In the first occurrence, Acts 11:26 claims that the term Christian is first used to label Christ-followers in Antioch. Later in Acts 26:28, after listening to Paul’s defence during his trial, Herod Agrippa questioned if the apostle was intending to persuade him to be a Christian. This usage suggests that ‘Christian’ was a label acknowledged by the Roman authorities in describing someone who followed Christ.

The other reference to ‘Christian’ appears in 1 Pet. 4:16. Based on the context of 1 Pet. 4:12–16, along with other references to suffering running throughout 1 Peter (for example, 1:6; 2:19–20; 3:14–17; 4:1, 12–19; 5:9–10), it seems that the Anatolian believers endured some form of suffering. This suffering, described as a ‘fiery ordeal,’ should not come as a surprise, as asserted by the author (1 Pet. 4:12). On the contrary, the believers are exhorted to count it as a cause of rejoicing as they also share in the sufferings of Christ. The reason for this suffering is explained in 4:14 as being ‘reviled for the name of Christ.’

In 1 Pet. 4:15–16, the author distinguishes two different types of suffering: one form of suffering results from sinful or criminal conduct such as being ‘a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker,’ which the offender rightfully deserves; and the other is simply because a person is labelled as a Christian, which

8 The authorship of 1 Peter has been contested, with many scholars viewing it as pseudonymous while others hold on to Petrine authorship. For an extensive discussion, see Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1*. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 116–162. Notwithstanding this debate, the precise identity of the authorship of 1 Peter does not distract us from the purpose of this contribution. Similarly, the dating of 1 Peter has also been subject to debate, but it is possible to date it to around the 60s to 90s CE. See the discussion in Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1*. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 110–115.

9 All English translations of the Scriptures are taken from the NRSV.

the author exhorts the believers not to be ashamed of but to glorify God in being given this name.

What can be inferred from 1 Pet. 4:12–16 is that the Anatolian believers, labelled as Christians, were subjected to some form of persecution¹⁰ at the hands of their opponents, not because they had done any wrong or carried out evil deeds, but simply because they carried the name of Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16). While being labelled as a *χριστιανός* is attached to the stigma of shame, the author exhorts them to regard it as an honourable title. This suggests that the label Christian was being coined and used by outsiders in an accusatory and derogatory manner. It also shows how Christ-followers needed to negotiate their relationship with the world they lived in, particularly with the Roman Empire.

David Horrell has discussed the terminology of *χριστιανός* at length, including its possible origin and subsequent use to describe Christ-followers.¹¹ Having analyzed how the label *χριστιανός* is used in the letters of Pliny and other corresponding contemporaneous extra-biblical writings,¹² Horrell concludes that this label in 1 Peter is borne by those who were ‘subject to informal hostility and to official censure, negative responses that could combine in the accusatorial process to bring about physical suffering and death.’¹³

What we have seen thus far is that the label *χριστιανός* carried with it a negative perception by members of the public, leading to persecution. According to Paul Holloway, this hostility towards Christians could be understood as a reflection of social prejudice, broadly defined as ‘a negative social attitude toward members of an identifiable social group based simply on their group membership.’¹⁴ This attitude is attributed to intergroup threat that could affect the survival of the competing group in terms of economic resources, physical well-being, political power and control, conflicting values, norms, beliefs, and scapegoating where an outgroup is conveniently and intentionally blamed for an ingroup’s misfortune.¹⁵ According

10 Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1*. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 236 n. 831, helpfully define persecution as ‘any type of hostility or ill treatment experienced by an individual or group (particularly minorities with little to no recourse for reciprocation) due to their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or belief.’

11 David G. Horrell, “The Label *Χριστιανός* (1 Pet. 4.16): Suffering, Conflict, and the Making of Christian Identity,” in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David G. Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 164–210. See also Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 276–280.

12 David G. Horrell, “The Label *Χριστιανός* (1 Pet. 4.16): Suffering, Conflict, and the Making of Christian Identity,” in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David G. Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 183–197.

13 David G. Horrell, “The Label *Χριστιανός* (1 Pet. 4.16): Suffering, Conflict, and the Making of Christian Identity,” in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David G. Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 198.

14 Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 21.

15 See Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 29–33.

to Holloway, social prejudice towards the Christ-movement can be seen throughout 1 Peter, particularly in passages such as 1 Pet. 2:12, 15; 3:9; 3:14–16; 4:3–4; and 4:14–16.¹⁶ Holloway argues that ‘1 Peter marks one of the earliest attempts, perhaps the earliest attempt, by a Christian author to craft a more or less comprehensive response to anti-Christian prejudice and its outcomes.’¹⁷ In this letter, the author addresses the insiders of this movement, ‘consoling them in their suffering and advising them on how to cope with popular prejudice and the persecution it engendered’¹⁸ by living as chosen aliens and exiles as part of the strategies of social creativity by turning what is perceived negatively by outsiders into something distinctive and positive for the ingroup members. It is this aspect of living as aliens and exiles in 1 Pet. 2:9–20 that I will pay close attention to, specifically through the lens of social creativity, in the remainder of this contribution.

Living as Chosen Aliens and Exiles: 1 Pet. 2:9–20

The recipients of 1 Peter are identified as ἐκλεκτοῖς παρεπιδήμοις διασπορᾶς Πόντου, Γαλατίας, Καππαδοκίας, Ἀσίας καὶ Βιθυνίας (1 Pet. 1:1), ‘the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.’¹⁹ This language of election (ἐκλεκτός) evokes the election of the people of Israel:²⁰ just as God chose Israel as his people, he also chose the Christians in the Anatolia region to be his people. It is significant that these Christians were reminded of their election in the midst of experiencing suffering and social hostility, as argued by Holloway: ‘Divine election is thus an integral part of the author of 1 Peter’s answer to the social ostracism and persecution of his readers.’²¹ This sets the tone for the letter, especially in 1 Pet. 2:9–20, to provide insights for people elected by and belonging to God into how to cope with social prejudice and navigate their relationship with the hostile world in which they lived.

The Shared Narrative as Chosen People: 1 Pet. 2:9–10

The language of divine election finds its climax in 1 Pet. 2:9–10, which summarizes the flow of thought from 1 Pet. 1:3–2:10 and also serves as a transition to

16 See also indirect references in 1 Pet. 2:4; 2:7; 2:23. On evidence of anti-Christian prejudice in 1 Peter, see Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 66–72.

17 Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 2.

18 Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 2.

19 Interestingly, the NRSV translation only highlights the notion of election in 1 Pet. 1:2: ‘who have been chosen and destined by God.’

20 See Exod. 19:5–6; Deut. 7:6–9; 14:2. The theme of divine election can also be found elsewhere in 1 Pet. 1:15; 2:21; 3:9; 5:10, 13.

21 Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective*, WUNT 244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 138.

1 Pet. 2:11–4:11. The Anatolian believers are reminded of their status with God in the following words:

But you are a chosen race (γένος ἐκλεκτόν), a royal priesthood (βασιλειον ιεράτευμα), a holy nation (ἔθνος ἅγιον), God's own people (λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν), in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts (τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐξαγγείλητε) of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people (λαός), but now you are God's people (λαὸς θεοῦ); once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

What is striking in 1 Pet. 2:9 is the use of 'three key terms from the vocabulary of ethnic identity' that are 'applied to the Church':²² γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός. These three terms are typically translated as 'race,' 'nation,' and 'people' respectively (see NRSV, ESV, and NIV 2011). What is also significant is that these terms are used in the Hebrew Bible to describe Israel as the people of God.²³ A few significant passages from the LXX are echoed in 1 Pet. 2:9–10. Deuteronomy 7:6, set within the larger context of specific instructions to maintain the distinction of the people of God from the nations surrounding them, is a crucial passage:

For you are a people holy (λαὸς ἅγιος) to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen (προεἰλατο) you out of all the peoples (τὰ ἔθνη) on earth to be his people, his treasured possession (λαὸν περιούσιον).

Another very significant passage where these terms are found is Exod. 19:5–6:

Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession (λαὸς περιούσιος) out of all the peoples (τῶν ἐθνῶν). Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom (βασιλειον ιεράτευμα) and a holy nation (ἔθνος ἅγιον).

Further woven into 1 Pet. 2:9–10 are echoes of LXX Isa. 43:20–21 describing Israel as 'my chosen people' (τὸ γένος μου τὸ ἐκλεκτόν) with the purpose 'that they might declare my praise' (τὰς ἀρετὰς μου δηγεῖσθαι). Finally, in 1 Pet. 2:10, a clear reference to Hos. 1–2 can also be detected where those who were not God's people are now called God's people.

What is impressive in 1 Pet. 2:9–10 is not only how γένος, ἔθνος, and λαός are used to describe the identity of the Anatolian Christians, but they are also the same designations of Israel as a holy people, a chosen people, and God's special

22 David G. Horrell, "'Race', 'Nation', 'People': Ethnoracial Identity Construction in 1 Pet. 2.9," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 133–163 (133).

23 For a survey, see David G. Horrell, "'Race', 'Nation', 'People': Ethnoracial Identity Construction in 1 Pet. 2.9," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 135–141.

possession.²⁴ The author appropriates what Scripture employs as the central markers of the identity of Israel to describe the Anatolian believers who are now given a new identity as God's people. Ancestral stories of Israel as the people of God are also woven into this passage, emphasizing that the gentile Christians also share the narrative of common ancestry. It is therefore not surprising for Katie Marcar to claim that 1 Pet. 2:9–10 is the climax of the author's statements on Christian identity.²⁵ This strategy of making a temporal reference to the shared heritage of the people of God in the past is a significant strategy of social creativity employed by the author of 1 Peter in constructing a distinct identity of the Anatolian Christ-followers. They are reminded that 'we are Christians and we are God's chosen people sharing a common ancestry with his people in the past.'²⁶

We have seen earlier that the label *χριστιανός* applied to the Anatolian believers most likely originated from outsiders as a derogatory label. In 1 Pet. 2:9–10, the author, as an insider, labels them as a chosen race, a holy nation, and a people for God's special possession. Collectively, this description not only functions as a positive and unique self-designation for Christ-followers, but also serves as a counter-narrative to the negative label imposed on them by the outsiders. Despite the shame they experienced when their opponents brought unjust accusations against them, the Anatolian Christians are assured of their special status as God's chosen, holy, and special people, rooted in the covenant he sealed with Israel. They are reminded of who they are and who they are not: they are Christians, not non-Christians; people who believe, not unbelievers (1 Pet. 2:7); people of God, not those who are not (1 Pet. 2:10); and people who do good deeds, not evildoers (1 Pet. 2:12).²⁷

Embracing Holiness as Aliens and Exiles: 1 Pet. 2:11

The language of *παρεπίδημος* used to address the recipients in 1 Pet. 1:1 appears again in 2:11 as a hendiadys, *πάροικοι καὶ παρεπίδημοι* (aliens and exiles). This echoes a very strong influence of the LXX on the author's language. In the land of the Hittites, Abraham describes himself thus: 'I am a stranger and an alien residing (*πάροικος καὶ παρεπίδημος*) among you' (LXX Gen. 23:4). Similar language is also found in LXX 1 Chron. 29:15: 'For we are aliens and transients before you, as were all our ancestors' (*ὅτι πάροικοί ἐσμεν ἐναντίον σου καὶ παροικοῦντες*).

24 David G. Horrell, "'Race', 'Nation', 'People': Ethnoracial Identity Construction in 1 Pet. 2.9," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 141.

25 Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, SNTSMS 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 229. See pages 229–247 for further discussion.

26 Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, SNTSMS 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 229.

27 For further discussion, see Janette H. Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Who You Are No Longer*, LNTS 645 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 35–87. See also Chapter 3 of this current volume by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Suffering as an Integral Part of Mission in 1 Peter," especially the section, 'Honour Discourse in 1 Peter.'

This use of *πάροικος* καὶ *παρεπίδημος* reflects how the authors of Genesis and 1 Chronicles distinguish Abraham and the nation of Israel from the surrounding nations, suggesting that they maintained a distinct social identity as God's people.²⁸

A closely related word of *πάροικος*, *παροιμία*, also appears in 1 Pet. 1:17. Interestingly, when the recipients are described as sojourners or exiles in 1:17 and 2:11, it is within the context of addressing them concerning their moral behaviour. In 1 Pet. 2:11, the Anatolian Christians, living as aliens and exiles, are called 'to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.' The same exhortation is also seen within the context of 1 Pet. 1:13–19 where they are not to 'be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance' (1:14), recalling their pagan past in which they lived in 'the futile ways inherited from your ancestors' (1:18), and did what other gentiles did, 'living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry' (4:3). In this respect, the author of 1 Peter employs the temporal strategy of social creativity in reminding the Anatolian believers 'we are Christian but we no longer live like our pagan past that was rooted in immoral living.'

Instead of living like the rest of their gentile neighbours, the Anatolian Christians are to live in the fear of the Lord 'during the time of your exile' (1:17). The author of 1 Peter evokes Lev. 11:44 as the ground for their conduct: 'You shall be holy, for I am holy' (1:16). God who called Israel to be his chosen people is also the same God who called the Anatolian Christians to be his people. Therefore, they are to be holy just as the God who called them is holy. This scriptural injunction serves as the basis for the moral conduct of Christians embodying the holiness of their God which must be visible for other gentiles to see and acknowledge (4:4).

The author of 1 Peter employs another strategy of social creativity in changing the comparative point of reference for the Anatolian Christians. They were no longer worshippers of pagan idols like other gentiles but worshippers of the one true God who is holy and called them to holiness. This is to say 'we are Christians who are worshippers of a holy God, not pagan idols.'

The author of 1 Peter utilizes the notion of *πάροικος* καὶ *παρεπίδημος* in a positive manner as a literary device to enable the recipients to see their social identity as Christians where it is closely bounded to holy living in the midst of manifold trials and persecutions. The Anatolian Christians are encouraged to embrace their unique identity as aliens and exiles and live in holiness in times of much affliction so that they would not feel discouraged, intimidated, and powerless.

Living in a Good Manner among the Gentiles as Aliens and Exiles: 1 Pet. 2:12

In 1 Pet. 2:12, the recipients are exhorted to conduct themselves in an honourable manner (*τὴν ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν ... ἔχοντες καλήν*) among the gentiles. The

28 For further discussion on the use of *πάροικος* καὶ *παρεπίδημος* in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, see Moses Chin, "A Heavenly Home for the Homeless: Aliens and Strangers in 1 Peter," *TynBul* 42.1 (1991): 99–109.

purpose for doing so is that when gentiles ‘malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds (ἐκ τῶν καλῶν ἔργων ἐποπτεύοντες) and glorify God when he comes to judge.’ The usage of καλός twice, translated as ‘honourable’ in 2:12 is striking. This highlights the close relationship between living honourable or good lives and carrying out honourable or good works. A number of passages in 1 Peter also exhort the readers to carry out good works with the use of ἀγαθοποιέω and its cognate in 2:12, 14, 15, 20; 3:6, 11, 13, 16, 17; and 4:19. Karen Jobes rightly comments that the ‘Christian lifestyle should, to whatever extent possible, be characterized by a way of life that even pagans could recognize as good.’²⁹ The concept of ἀγαθοποιέω and καλός ἔργον governing the lifestyle of the believers ‘links Christian ethics to the best of pagan culture to show that Christians are not a threat by reason of their standard of conduct.’³⁰

Sean du Toit argues that the author of 1 Peter employs the concept of doing good as ‘a key element in his strategy for how the audience should negotiate life in the Graeco-Roman world.’³¹ This is done by negotiating social conflict through various positive actions towards outsiders and avoiding retaliation for the suffering and hostility suffered as a result of social prejudice. By doing good works benefiting one’s enemies and other virtuous deeds, it is hoped that outsiders would be able to observe this manner of life of the Christians. This could further present the believers with opportunities to defend their devotion to Jesus with the hope of alleviating their sufferings (1 Pet. 3:15–16).

The sort of good conduct and good works envisioned by the author are further expounded in 1 Pet. 2:13–3:7 involving the public sphere and private homes. Within the public sphere, Christians should not be seen as a disruptive force in the society where they are to submit to governing authorities, honour everyone, and love one another. Submission or honouring Caesar is certainly not a blanket submission, as the author also reminds the believers that they should fear God (2:17). Their ultimate loyalty is to God, and not the state.

In carrying out good works in the public sphere, Bruce Winter argues that this would have included civic benefaction for the benefit of the wider civic society,³² which included the acts of supplying grain during famine, erecting, adorning, or refurbishing public buildings, and constructing roads amongst others. However, Travis Williams takes this argument further by suggesting that good works should also include moral excellence.³³ Drawing these two together, du Toit argues that

29 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 170.

30 Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on 1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 177. Achtemeier describes ‘doing good’ as ‘virtually a technical term for our author to describe Christians’ activity within the pagan world’ (185).

31 Sean du Toit, “Negotiating Hostility through Beneficial Deeds,” *TynBul* 70.2 (2019): 221–243 (221).

32 Bruce Winter, “The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors: Romans 13.3–4 and 1 Peter 2.14–15,” *JSNT* 34 (1988): 87–103. See also another survey of inscriptions and literary evidence in Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 2/337 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 68–81 and 280–295.

33 Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 2/337 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 39–67.

the common denominator is ‘activity that *benefits another*,’³⁴ whether that is in terms of an individual or a community.³⁵ Such a notion of benefitting others is also rooted in the Jesus tradition (for example, Matt. 5:13–16 and the wider exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5–7; Lk. 6:33–35), and the counsel of the prophet Jeremiah to the exiled people of God to ‘seek the welfare of the city’ (Jer. 29:7). The author of 1 Peter also suggests the use of spiritual gifts in serving one another (1 Pet. 4:8–11).

Within the private sphere, the Anatolian Christians are exhorted not to be seen as a disruptive force at home. In 1 Pet. 2:18–3:7, the author puts forward a catalogue of household codes governing the relationship of members in private dwellings. While the author may have utilized a common existing Greco-Roman practice, he repurposed it for his audience to exhort them as members to act virtuously in the home, benefitting everyone in the household. This is done so that ultimately, ‘the discharge of household duties benefits the flourishing of the city, ... [since] households that undermine the city could incur the judgment of governing authorities, while households that embody virtue could incite the praise of those in authority.’³⁶

This is another strategy of social creativity, introducing new dimensions that are advantageous to the ingroup by turning what is a derogatory label of *χριστιανοί* into one that is characterized by good conduct. The author of 1 Peter is saying, ‘We are Christians, but we are people with good conduct in both public and private spheres of life.’

Being Faithful in Suffering: 1 Pet. 2:19–20

The theme of suffering runs throughout 1 Peter. There are numerous references to actual or potential suffering, evidenced by the frequency of the use of words related to suffering such as *πειρασμός* (twice),³⁷ *πάσχω* (14 times),³⁸ and *πάθημα* (four times).³⁹ In recent years, the debate on the nature of suffering in 1 Peter has been centred around local, sporadic, and unofficial persecution arising from social prejudice and discrimination of the general populace. Earlier scholarship around the turn of the twentieth century tends to focus on official persecution of Christians.⁴⁰ However, David Horrell has rightly questioned the dichotomy of seeing the nature of persecution as coming from either official or unofficial sources. Instead, he has

34 Sean du Toit, “Negotiating Hostility through Beneficial Deeds,” *TynBul* 70.2 (2019): 223, emphasis original.

35 Sean du Toit, “Negotiating Hostility through Beneficial Deeds,” *TynBul* 70.2 (2019): 228. See also Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 1. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 712–718.

36 Sean du Toit, “Negotiating Hostility through Beneficial Deeds,” *TynBul* 70.2 (2019): 236.

37 1 Pet. 1:6; 4:12.

38 1 Pet. 2:19, 20, 21, 23; 3:14, 17, 18; 4:1 (twice), 15, 19; 5:10.

39 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13; 5:1, 9.

40 See the survey by Travis B. Williams, “Suffering from a Critical Oversight: The Persecutions of 1 Peter within Modern Scholarship,” *CBR* 10.2 (2012): 277–282.

convincingly argued that the persecution endured by the Anatolian Christians is *both* official and unofficial in nature:

Christians are experiencing hostility from the populace among whom they live, suffering verbal slander and accusation. This hostility can reach the level where it takes the form of legal accusation, which results in Christians being brought before the governor for trial ... This, if proven ... would most likely lead to suffering like Christ, suffering to death.⁴¹

Apart from responding to unjust suffering by heeding the call for joy in suffering (1 Pet. 1:6), reciprocating by doing good (2:12–17; 3:13–17; 4:1–5), and focusing on the believer's imitation of Christ's afflictions (2:21–23; 4:14–16), another insightful action is faithful endurance rooted in the understanding of χάρις.

In 1 Pet. 2:19–20, the notion of grace (χάρις) is closely connected to suffering. When one is mindful of God and endures while suffering unjustly, this action is described as χάρις (2:19). This is further elaborated in the subsequent verse that if one endures when suffering for doing good, this is grace (χάρις) from God (2:20). Frequently, χάρις is interpreted as divine favour from God granted to those enduring suffering⁴² or as a praiseworthy response by those who endure suffering.⁴³

Travis Williams has carried out a careful review of seeing χάρις as divine favour and questioned its interpretation.⁴⁴ Drawing from the notion of reciprocity embedded in the understanding of χάρις in the Greco-Roman world, Williams explores the idea of χάρις that describes the expression of gratitude in response to benefits received.⁴⁵ The notion of χάρις 'not only represents gifts bestowed, but also gifts required, gifts which perpetuate an unbroken circle of exchange.'⁴⁶ Applied to 1 Peter, χάρις represents a reciprocal gift which the Anatolian Christians as recipients of God's beneficence are obliged to return. Just as an ancient Greco-Roman community might express its reciprocity toward a benefactor through a public ceremony of recognition for gifts received, Williams argues that the author of 1 Peter

41 David G. Horrell, "The Label Χριστιανός (1 Pet. 4.16): Suffering, Conflict, and the Making of Christian Identity," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David G. Horrell, LNTS 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 197.

42 For example, see Duane F. Watson, *First Peter*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 68; Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 191–192.

43 For example, see Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 107–108; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on 1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 196.

44 Travis B. Williams, "Reciprocity and Suffering in 1 Peter 2, 19–20: Reading χάρις in Its Ancient Social Context," *Biblica* 97.3 (2016): 422–428.

45 Travis B. Williams, "Reciprocity and Suffering in 1 Peter 2, 19–20: Reading χάρις in Its Ancient Social Context," *Biblica* 97.3 (2016): 428–431.

46 Travis B. Williams, "Reciprocity and Suffering in 1 Peter 2, 19–20: Reading χάρις in Its Ancient Social Context," *Biblica* 97.3 (2016): 429. See also Chapter 3 of this current volume by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Suffering as an integral part of mission in 1 Peter."

‘defines the endurance of unjust suffering as the appropriate reciprocal response toward the favors which God has bestowed upon the readers.’⁴⁷

This understanding of χάρις is significant for our understanding of unjust suffering. By faithfully enduring suffering as a reciprocal response to God’s favours, the author of 1 Peter draws its readers into a non-retaliatory reaction to the hostility they experienced, and at the same time, gives a new understanding to the label χριστιανός by embracing what is negative and turning it into something positive that defines the people of God. Williams rightly says, ‘Patient endurance during times of trial is not simply a means of achieving divine favor; it has become the very definition of how a Christian relates to God.’⁴⁸ However, the author of 1 Peter does not leave the Anatolian Christians hopeless in their suffering. In 1 Pet. 5:10, he comforts them with these words: ‘And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace (ὁ δὲ θεὸς πάσης χάριτος), who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.’ This exhortation firmly seals the eschatological hope the Anatolian Christians had in God. They could trust in God’s faithfulness and look forward to his final vindication.

The author of 1 Peter employs the social creativity strategy of changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group so that what was perceived to be negative is now perceived as positive. Unjust suffering is now seen as a positive response to the grace of God with the firm hope that God will not disappoint the Anatolian Christians and that he will vindicate them at the end of the age. The author is saying ‘we are Christians who suffer unjustly but this suffering is our response to God’s grace and he will vindicate us soon.’

As a summary, it would be helpful to tabulate the various strategies in social creativity that we have explored for a clearer presentation (see Table 2.1). Taken together, social creativity can be a helpful tool in constructing the social identity of the Anatolian believers as Christians and to instruct them to navigate through life as a minority in the Greco-Roman world.

Living as a Christian Minority in Malaysia

My reading of 1 Peter has significant implications for those who live as religious minorities in less favourable circumstances not unlike the Petrine readers in the first century CE. I will offer my reflections, highlighting insights on how this epistle, and, more specifically, the applied social creativity strategy, remains relevant today.

According to data published by the Malaysian Department of Statistics based on the latest Population and Housing Census carried out in 2020, there are 32.4 million

47 Travis B. Williams, “Reciprocity and Suffering in 1 Peter 2, 19–20: Reading χάρις in Its Ancient Social Context,” *Biblica* 97.3 (2016): 432. See also Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1*. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 798: ‘χάρις is somehow defined as the patient endurance of undeserved suffering.’

48 Travis B. Williams, “Reciprocity and Suffering in 1 Peter 2, 19–20: Reading χάρις in Its Ancient Social Context,” *Biblica* 97.3 (2016): 438.

Table 2.1 Overview of social creativity strategies in 1 Peter

<i>Types of Strategy</i>	<i>References to 1 Peter</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Change dimensions of comparison	1 Pet. 2: 19–20: be faithful in suffering	We are Christians who suffer unjustly but this suffering is our response to God’s grace and he will vindicate us soon
Change values in comparison	1 Pet. 2:12: living in a good manner among the gentiles as aliens and exiles	We are Christians but we are people with good conduct in both public and private spheres of life
Change comparison group	1 Pet. 2:11: embracing holiness as aliens and exiles	We are Christians who are worshippers of a holy God, not pagan idols
Compare to new temporal point of reference	1 Pet. 2:9–10: the shared narrative as chosen people 1 Pet. 2:11: embracing holiness as aliens and exiles	We are Christians and we are God’s chosen people sharing a common ancestry with his people in the past We are Christian but we no longer live like our pagan past that was rooted in immoral living

people in Malaysia. Muslims comprise 63.5% of the population, Christians 9.1%, with the remaining population consisting of Buddhists, Hindus, and other religious faiths.⁴⁹ Deeply interwoven with the religious identity is the ethnic identity of the adherents of the various faiths: Muslims are generally Malay, Buddhists Chinese, and Hindus Indians.⁵⁰ Because of such diversity, religious intolerance has been a pressing concern in recent years where there are increasing restrictions on religious freedom. In March 2019, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) published a report scrutinizing the right to freedom of religion in Malaysia.⁵¹ Although freedom of religion is enshrined in the Constitution of Malaysia,⁵² this report states that existing laws ‘fall short of the protections required under international human rights law and standards.’⁵³ It also highlights six key issues affecting freedom of

49 The Population and Housing Census is carried out every ten years, with the latest census completed in 2020. See the census from the Department of Statistics, Malaysia, <https://www.mycensus.gov.my/#latest-statistics-2020> (accessed 20 October 2024).

50 Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia defines a Malay as ‘a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language’ and also ‘conforms to Malay custom.’ According to this definition, a person’s ethnic identity is directly related to their religious faith.

51 For the full report published by the ICJ, “Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Malaysia: A Briefing Paper,” <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Malaysia-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>. (accessed 2 October 2024).

52 Article 11 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia provides that every person has the right to profess and to practise his or her religion. However, the propagation of other religions to Muslims is prohibited, and applicable laws restricting this have been enacted.

53 ICJ, “Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Malaysia: A Briefing Paper,” 11, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Malaysia-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>. For further discussion, see pages 11–15.

religion in Malaysia, and among those that affect the Christian minority include prosecution of proselytism among Muslims and prohibitions on the use of the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslims.⁵⁴ This results in non-Muslim communities, particularly the Christians, experiencing increasing social hostility. Labelled as the ‘enemies of Islam’ in a local publication by the *Majlis Agama Islam Selangor* (The Selangor State Islamic Religious Council), Christians are described negatively as people who harbour ill intentions and spread lies.⁵⁵ Similar to Christ-followers labelled as Christians in 1 Peter, Christians in Malaysia are also subjected to social prejudice.

Large numbers of Malaysian Christians can identify with the strategy of social creativity in 1 Pet. 2:9–10. Often identified by Muslims with derogatory labels such as ‘the enemies of Islam’ and ‘threats to Islam,’⁵⁶ they are reminded of who they are in Christ: they are God’s chosen, holy, and special people, and they are assured of this special and privileged status. Their relationship with God is one that is expressed by an irrevocable and ineradicable bond regardless of whatever negative labels are designated to them by outsiders.

Malaysian Christians, often feeling like strangers in their homeland, are also able to identify with the estrangement experienced by the Anatolian Christians. Apart from ethnic prejudice, frequent political rhetoric that labels the ethnic Chinese population as *pendatang*, which carries the connotation of unwelcome immigrant or alien, is detrimental to nation building. In addition, some Muslim clerics also label them as *kafir*, which means infidels, in their sermons and teachings. Some even advocate that the Chinese population should return to China, the homeland of their forefathers.⁵⁷ This derogatory and insulting labelling creates a sense of strangeness and alienation in a land where the Chinese population has dwelt for generations. It was reported that S. Shashi Kumar, the president of Global Human Rights Federation, claimed, ‘Almost daily there are preachers calling the

54 ICJ, “Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Malaysia: A Briefing Paper,” 3–4, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Malaysia-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>. The word ‘Allah,’ referring to God, has been used in the translation of the Malay Language Bible since 1612. It is only since 1986 that the use of ‘Allah’ by Christians has been subject to controversy. See ICJ, “Challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Malaysia: A Briefing Paper,” 28–29, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Malaysia-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf>.

55 Majlis Agama Islam Selangor [The Selangor State Islamic Religious Council], *Pendedahan Agenda Kristian [Exposing the Christian Agenda]* (Shah Alam: Majlis Agama Islam Selangor, 2014), 16, <https://www.mais.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Buku-Pendedahan-Agenda-Kristian-Completed.pdf>. See also James Lovelock, “‘Enemies of Islam’: Malaysian Book Accuses Christian of Conspiracy,” *UCANews*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/enemies-of-islam-malaysian-book-accuses-christians-of-conspiracy/92331>.

56 For example, see Majlis Agama Islam Selangor [The Selangor State Islamic Religious Council], *Pendedahan Agenda Kristian [Exposing the Christian Agenda]* (Shah Alam: Majlis Agama Islam Selangor, 2014), 16, <https://www.mais.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Buku-Pendedahan-Agenda-Kristian-Completed.pdf>.

57 See James Chin, “Racism towards the Chinese Minority in Malaysia: Political Islam and Institutional Barriers,” *The Political Quarterly* 93 (2022): 451–459, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13145>.

non-Malays “*pendatang*” (immigrant) and “*kafir*,” (infidel) but no one is doing anything to stop this racism.”⁵⁸ Reading 1 Peter reminds Malaysian Christians that they are people called by God to be a chosen people, a holy nation, people belonging to God, and they are to live as aliens and exiles in the society in which they reside. The strategies of social creativity where there are changes to the comparison group and new temporal points of reference can be adopted.

Christians in Malaysia are exhorted to carry out good deeds benefitting society at large. For many decades, Christians have been actively involved in establishing hospitals, schools, orphanages, and NGOs serving the poor, the marginalized, and those struggling with substance abuse. In addition, Christians have also carried out acts of mercy and relief work during times of natural disaster. These acts should not only continue but should be intensified where possible so that such good deeds are visible to all in the community.⁵⁹ Any form of intimidation, persecution, or threat meted out by the authorities or individuals should not cause Christians to be fearful of their public witness or to retaliate by causing public unrest. As recipients of grace from God, faithful endurance of such sufferings could be an appropriate reciprocal response to the favours received from God while firmly holding on to the hope of ultimate vindication from God. The strategies of social creativity where there are changes to dimensions of comparison and values in comparison are helpful considerations for Christians in Malaysia.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have attempted to reflect on the use of the label ‘Christian’ in 1 Pet. 4:16 as a powerful self-designation in constructing the social identity of a Christ-believing community in the Anatolia region by using the strategy of social creativity. What appears as a derogatory label used against those who experienced social prejudice as a result of their faith and as a minority in the Greco-Roman world, the author of 1 Peter creatively uses it as a powerful badge of honour in the process of identity formation. The author instructs his readers to think and live differently from the prevailing social norms by weaving together a sense of shared history and ancestry with the Jewish narrative of aliens and exiles. The author also urges them to pursue a life of holiness, live honourably by carrying out good works

58 Kalbana Perimbanayagam, “Civil Society Groups Question Police over Inaction against Preacher,” *News Straits Times*, 15 December 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/crime-courts/2021/12/754557/civil-society-groups-question-police-over-inaction-against-preacher>.

59 For further discussion, see Sivin Kit, “Christian Participation and Creative Resistance: Reflecting on Luther’s Two-fold Governance in Muslim-Majority Malaysia,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56 (2017): 260–271.

for the benefit of others, and to embrace endurance of suffering as a way of life in response to the grace of God.

This reading of 1 Peter has powerful implications for me as a Christian living both as a religious and ethnic minority. As aliens and exiles living in a foreign land, this letter shows us how to navigate our lives in this world as people of God without compromising our identity as Christians and neglecting our Christian witness, even if it means embracing suffering for the sake of the name of Christ which we bear.

3 Suffering as an Integral Part of Mission in 1 Peter

Myriam Klinker-DeKlerck

Abstract

Most scholars who acknowledge a missionary dimension in 1 Peter explicitly connect this dimension to the display of honourable conduct. In this view, the situation of suffering that permeates the entire letter is at most understood either as an occasion for witnessing or as an obstacle to missionary effort. In this contribution, based on an investigation of honour discourse related to the themes of suffering and witnessing, I suggest that the reality of suffering is fully intertwined with the call for honourable conduct and its missionary objective. I will argue that, for Peter, far from being an obstacle, the endurance of suffering is an integral part of the missionary process, rooted in a firm theological conviction. By consequence, the phenomenon of social creativity in 1 Peter is anchored at a deeper theological level, their minority position and actual suffering being an essential theological core of their identity and vocation as Jesus followers.

Keywords: 1 Peter, religious minority, suffering, mission, honour discourse, shame

Introduction

The audience of 1 Peter formed a religious minority in pagan society, finding itself in a liminal existence between their former identities and their new identity in Christ.¹ Their liminal position, and especially the discrimination by their pagan neighbours it entailed, called for social creativity.² We see a fine example of this phenomenon in the honour discourse throughout the letter. The question is whether this *social* creativity is also anchored at a deeper *theological* level; their socially vulnerable position and their actual suffering being an essential theological core of

1 For the concepts ‘religious minority’ and ‘liminality,’ see the introductory Chapter 1 of this current volume by Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, “The Church as Minority in the Context of Islam.”

2 For the phenomenon of social creativity in 1 Peter, see Chapter 2 of this current volume by Kar Yong Lim, “Reading 1 Peter in Constructing Minority Identity.”

their identity and vocation as Jesus followers.³ In what follows, I suggest this to be the case by relating more closely the suffering of the audience of Peter's letter and their missionary vocation.⁴

The missionary focus of 1 Peter is a topic of much discussion.⁵ Four passages in this letter seem to point to some missional objective. In 2:9, the notion of priesthood is linked to the task of witnessing. In 2:11–12, Peter states a purpose for his call to honourable conduct and good works (καλή ἀναστροφή and κάλα ἔργα), namely that hostile outsiders will notice this and glorify God accordingly. In 3:1–2, through honourable conduct (ἀναστροφή) wives can win their husbands to the faith (κερδαίνω). Finally, in 3:13–17, Peter exhorts believers to give a defence (ἀπολογία) of the hope they have and, again, their conduct (ἀναστροφή) is linked to its effect on outsiders.

Since the call to honourable conduct (combined with good works in 1:17 and 2:12) is three times connected to the effect on outsiders, it is not surprising that commentators frequently interpret this call as having a missionary objective.⁶ Mostly, this is not understood as active evangelization, but rather as mission through passive attraction.⁷ However, some interpreters argue that there is no missionary focus at all in 1 Peter. An example is Travis B. Williams who, taking into account the subaltern position of the readers, interprets the call for honourable conduct as a strategy of cautious resistance.⁸ In this contribution, I start from the assumption that 1 Peter contains, to some extent, a missionary *impetus* for the addressees. The

3 See also Chapter 6 of this current volume by Erika van Nes-Visscher, "Through the Eyes of Christian Minorities," which argues precisely this.

4 The authorship of 1 Peter is a matter of scholarly disagreement. For the discussion, see, e.g., N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in its World* (London: SPCK, 2019), 758–760. I will refer to the author as 'Peter' and assume a historical setting within the span of the apostle's lifetime, in accordance with the explicit testimony of the document itself.

5 Due to space limitations, I must remain concise on this matter. See for more literature, Torrey Seland, "Resident Aliens in Mission: Missional Practices in the Emerging Church of 1 Peter," *BBR* 19 (2009): 565–589; Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 30 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014), 9 (footnote 25).

6 This is an observation from Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 30 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014), 9, who marks as a second frequently assumed objective reducing outsider hostility through conforming to broader social expectations.

7 David Horrell, "Leiden als Diskriminierung und Martyrium: (Selbst-)Stigmatisierung und Soziale Identität am Beispiel des ersten Petrusbriefes," in *Erkennen und Erleben: Beiträge zur psychologischen Erforschung des frühen Christentums*, ed. Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 119–132 (128). To what extent there must be an overlap with prevailing *mores* is, of course, the question. Miroslav Volf, e.g., speaks of an attitude of 'soft difference' (Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 15–30). See also the so-called Balch-Elliott debate concerning the social strategy in 1 Peter (for a concise overview, see Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 30 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014), 16–14).

8 Travis B. Williams, *Good Works in 1 Peter: Negotiating Social Conflict and Christian Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, WUNT 30 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014), 185–274. Followed by Ruth

object of their witnessing is stated twice: they are to ‘proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (2:9).⁹ Furthermore, they are urged to account for ‘the hope that is in you’ (3:15). Peter also states twice the purpose of their witnessing (2:12 and 3:1–2 as already noted above).

The question arises as to how this missional dimension relates to the reality of suffering that permeates the entire letter. The Jesus-followers in Asia Minor, to whom the letter was addressed, clearly suffered in their gentile environment (1 Pet 1:6; 2:12, 19–20; 3:9, 14, 16–17; 4:1, 4, 12–16, 19; 5:10). They were confronted, at the very least, with verbal abuse (καταλαλέω – ‘speak evil’ 2:12; 3:16; λοιδορία – ‘insult’ 3:9; ἐπηρέάζω – ‘slander,’ ‘speak maliciously against’ 3:16; and βλασφημέω – ‘slander’ 4:4). It seems they were depicted as criminals, because, being χριστιανόνι (‘Christians’ 4:13), they had turned away from their former way of life (1 Pet 2:2; 4:3–4). Whether their suffering also resulted from legal forms of persecution is still debated. Most commentators interpret the suffering as social ostracism, including sporadic actions from local governments.¹⁰ Recently, however, a setting of more official persecution has also been proposed.¹¹ What is certain is that their suffering was due to their faith in Christ. It was identity-bound and had the character of persecution.

The themes of suffering and the missionary *impetus* in 1 Peter are usually treated separately, with few exceptions.¹² A missionary objective is explicitly linked to the display of honourable conduct, while the situation of suffering is at most understood as an *occasion*, an ‘opportunity for recruitment.’¹³ Ferdinand Hahn even sees

Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 136.

9 Translations from Scripture, unless otherwise stated, are taken from the NRSV.

10 One could think of ‘police administration which could be tightened or relaxed at any time, as the authorities thought fit’ (E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1947), 55). See also Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BENT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 42–43; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 6.

11 Travis B. Williams, *Persecution in 1 Peter: Differentiating and Contextualizing Early Christian Suffering*, NovTestSupp 125 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012). It would lead too far to go fully into this matter. Questions of authorship and date of the letter, e.g., obviously play an important role too.

12 E.g., P.J. Robinson, “Some Missiological Perspectives from 1 Peter 2:4–10,” *Missionalia* 17 (1989): 176–187, who, on page 177 explicitly links the congregation’s witness to its suffering. He does not elaborate on this connection, however. See also Horrell, specifically on 4:16, which he interprets in a judicial context (David Horrell, “Leiden als Diskriminierung und Martyrium: (Selbst-)Stigmatisierung und Soziale Identität am Beispiel des ersten Petrusbriefes,” in *Erkennen und Erleben: Beiträge zur psychologischen Erforschung des frühen Christentums*, ed. Gerd Theissen and Petra von Gemünden (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 120–123, 129). Recently, Edward L. Smither, “Suffering in God’s Mission: Reflections from First Peter,” in *Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message and Methods of 1 Peter*, ed. Abenaezer G. Urga, Jessica A. Udall, and Edward L. Smither (Littleton: William Carey, 2024), Kindle edition, 218–240.

13 Reinhard Feldmeier, *Der erste Brief des Petrus*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 15.1 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), 101: “Gelegenheit zur Werbung.”

the audience's suffering as an *obstacle* to missionary activity: 'Christians are harassed to the limit of their endurance, and all missionary activity is denied them.'¹⁴

In what follows I want to contribute to the interpretation of 1 Peter, by suggesting that the reality of suffering is fully intertwined with the call for honourable conduct and its missionary objective. I will argue that, far from an obstacle, suffering is an integral part of the missional dimension of 1 Peter. I do so by using honour discourse as a lens through which this connection can be understood. Although honour discourse in 1 Peter has been explored before, as far as I know it has not been used to study a potential connection between the themes of suffering and witnessing in the letter. Research on the letters of Paul, however, shows that the suffering mentioned there can have a proclaiming or witnessing function – not only the suffering of the apostle himself, but also the experiences of suffering in the corporate congregations.¹⁵ In some of his letters, when examined through the lens of honour discourse, this connection between identity-bound suffering and witnessing becomes even more pronounced.¹⁶ This observation invites us to explore whether a similar dynamic can be detected in 1 Peter.

Honour Discourse in 1 Peter

Honour and shame are pivotal values in Mediterranean cultures. They serve as a 'default grammar,' actively working behind the scenes of social behaviour to structure meaning and purpose.¹⁷ In doing so, honour and shame do more than simply describe a state of affairs; they evaluate it.¹⁸ This dynamic was also fundamental in biblical cultures, so sensitivity to honour discourse is necessary to properly understand what is happening beneath the surface of a biblical text. Honour terminology and discourse in 1 Peter has been investigated before by John H. Elliott, Barth L.

14 Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*, SBT 47 (London: SCM, 1965), 141.

15 Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); James Ware, *The Mission of the Church in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, NovTSup 120 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005).

16 Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Paul's View on Christian Suffering: Honour Discourse as a Lens," *JSPL* 10.2 (2020): 121–137. Klinker-De Klerck, "How to Inherit the Kingdom of God? Kenotic Suffering Through the Lens of Honour Discourse," in *Troubling Texts in the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Rob van Houwelingen on the Occasion of his Retirement*, ed. M. Klinker-De Klerck, A. den Heijer, and J. van Nes (Leuven: Peeters, 2022), 181–198; Klinker-De Klerck, "'For He Has Graciously Granted You the Privilege (...) of Suffering for Him': Honour Discourse as a Lens for Studying the Relationship Between God's Love and the Suffering of Christians," in *The Logic of God's Love. Explorations in Biblical and Systematic Theology*, ed. Arnold Huijgen, Arjan van den Os, Eric Peels, and Dolf te Velde. *Studies in Reformed Theology* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 198–217.

17 Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), Kindle edition, 82.

18 For an introduction to the study and character of honour discourse and how it functioned as a way of social engineering, see David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 1–33.

Campbell, and David A. deSilva.¹⁹ The latter developed a heuristic tool to uncover honour discourse in New Testament texts and used it to map the honour discourse in 1 Peter, the main outline of which I will now briefly summarize.²⁰

Because of their faith, Jesus-followers stopped participating in traditional rites, refusing to give honour to the gods they once worshipped. In the eyes of their neighbours, this transgressive impiety was seen as a threat to the stability of society, piety being the foundation of the household structure, the socio-economical fabric, and the state.²¹ As a result, Jesus-followers experienced socially imposed shame. Shaming is a tool of social control used by majority groups to ‘rehabilitate’ minority groups. ‘Their neighbors had been seeking to convince the addressees of 1 Peter that adherence to the Christian group and perseverance in its practices was disadvantageous, to make them feel deeply the loss of face that came as a consequence of their altered allegiances and behaviors.’²²

19 John H. Elliott, *Conflict, Community, and Honor: 1 Peter in Social-Scientific Perspective*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 51–86. Here, Elliott republishes an earlier article from 1996 and also provides an appendix of honour-shame terminology and related semantic domains (80–87). Barth Campbell analyzes the dynamics of honour and shame in the letter within a classical rhetorical scheme. Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, SBL Diss series 160 (Atlanta: SBL, 1998); David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

20 David A. deSilva, “Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter,” in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, ed. R. Jewett, Wayne Alloway, Jr., and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 159–186. See also Jayson Georges, *1 Peter: An Honor-Shame Paraphrase* (e-book published by Timē Press, 2017).

21 On the core function of piety in the Roman household, see Bruce Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), Kindle edition, 212–226. See also David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 92:

Participation in the cults of Rome, the emperor and the traditional pantheon showed one’s *pietas* or *eusebeia*, one’s reliability, in effect, to fulfill one’s obligations to family, patron, city, province, and empire. Participation showed one’s support of the social body, one’s desire to do what was necessary to secure the welfare of the city, and one’s commitment to the stability and ongoing life of the city.

Because of the close interconnection between local deities and the Roman imperial order, Burnett prefers to speak of ‘imperial divine honors’ rather than ‘imperial cult.’ See D. Clint Burnett, *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors: Christ, Caesar, and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024), 50–55. Conversion to Christ also held a potential destabilizing threat to the identity of associations – see Bruce W. Longenecker, “The Wrath of the Deities and the Privileged Deceased: Narrating Death in the Associational Rupture at Thessalonica,” *NTS* 70 (2024): 88–98, who substantiates this with epigraphic material (92–95). ‘It was essential to an association’s prospects to be able to demonstrate a determined fidelity to its original identity and to any commitments made in the course of its development’ (92).

22 David A. deSilva, “Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter,” in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, ed. R. Jewett, Wayne Alloway, Jr., and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 159–186, accessed through Perlego.com 4 September 2024 (no page references).

The honour discourse in the letter shows that Peter uses several strategies to insulate the addressees from this experience of deep shame. Essentially, he identifies grounds for their self-respect and affirms their worth, encouraging them to keep their faith rather than allowing themselves to be ‘rehabilitated.’ One strategy is turning the tables on their neighbours by showing that the judgement of outsiders can be fundamentally flawed. After all, they reject ‘the living stone,’ who is so precious in God’s sight (2:4). Meanwhile, Peter addresses the converts as people who understand what honourable conduct entails and exhorts them to ‘cultivate ... this solid basis for self-respect in terms outsiders should be able to understand.’²³ Another strategy is offering an alternative perspective upon the experience of shame. Peter states, for example, that their various trials are proving genuine commitment to God (1 Pet 1:6–7), or he points to the honourable example of the suffering Jesus himself (2:21–24; 3:18–22). Thus, the trials they endure as followers of Jesus are neither strange nor exceptional; rather, they are a badge of honour (4:12–14). Finally, in the midst of these trials, Peter urges them to defend their honour with a specifically Christian response – by following in the footsteps of Jesus, refusing to use violence (2:22–23), or by offering a ‘gentle but committed verbal defense (an apologia, 1 Pet 3:15) for their new commitments and practices.’²⁴

In sum, deSilva shows that through these strategies, Peter’s honour discourse in the letter equips converts to withstand the social pressure of shame while simultaneously empowering them to continue following Jesus.

Investigating the Witnessing Passages

In what follows, I will briefly examine the four passages that contain explicit witnessing terminology (2:9; 2:11–12; 3:1–2; 3:13–17) and investigate (1) to what extent they relate to the theme of suffering and (2) to what extent the themes of witnessing and suffering are embedded in the specific honour discourse of the passage and its context.

Proclaiming God’s Mighty Acts (2:9)

In 2:1–10, believers are granted the designations of God’s chosen people, and Peter exhorts them to come to Jesus, the living stone, and let themselves be built into a spiritual house. ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light’ (2:9). Peter uses the verb ἐξαγγέλλω,

23 David A. deSilva, “Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter,” in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, ed. R. Jewett, Wayne Alloway, Jr., and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 159–186. See also Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, SBL Diss series 160 (Atlanta: SBL, 1998), 35, footnote 7.

24 David A. deSilva, “Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter,” in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, ed. R. Jewett, Wayne Alloway, Jr., and John G. Lacey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 159–186.

which means ‘to tell out,’ ‘to proclaim,’ or ‘to make known.’²⁵ This verb often occurs in the Greek text of the Psalms, where it almost always relates to the proclaiming of God’s deeds and excellence.²⁶ Here also, τὰς ἀρετάς (‘majesty,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘virtue,’ ‘praises’) are the object of the proclaiming.²⁷ Peter seems to allude here to Isa. 43:21 (τὰς ἀρετάς μου διηγέσθαι). There is, however, disagreement on the precise referent of ἐξαγγέλλω: does it denote public witnessing with a missional character or, rather, praise in worship to God? This last view implies that there is no missionary activity involved.²⁸ Pointing to the allusion to Isa. 43, Mark Boyley argues convincingly that Peter intentionally draws from the wider context (Isa. 42–43) of the suffering servant with his ministry to the nations, seeing the believers as a reconstituted Israel.

This reconstituted Israel will have a new purpose with international scope: they will be witnesses over against the inadequate witnesses to the gods of the nations (43:9–12). Dubbed ‘my chosen people’ in continuity with pre-exilic Israel (43:20), their purpose is summarised: ‘that they might declare my praises [τάς ἀρετάς μου διηγέσθαι]’ (LXX 43:21).²⁹

This allusion of the witnessing vocabulary in 2:9 to the context of the suffering servant points to further connections with the reality of suffering in the surrounding verses. Only a few verses later, in 2:12, Peter makes it concrete by referring to the believers’ being slandered as evildoers (καταλαλοῦσιν ὑμῶν ὡς κακοποιῶν) – see below. Furthermore, in 2:1–10 the witnessing of the believers is intrinsically connected to the suffering and rejection of their Lord, ‘the living stone.’ Peter exhorts the believers to follow him as ‘living stones.’ ‘Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (2:5).³⁰

25 LSJ, 580.

26 Pss. 9:15; 55 (56):9; 70 (71):15; 72 (73):28; 78 (79):13; 106 (107):22; 118 (119):13, 26; also Prov. 12:16; Sirach 18:3; 39:10; 44:15. The verb occurs in the NT only one more time, namely in the short variant of the longer ending of Mark.

27 See also Isa. 42:8, 12; 43:21; 63:7; Hab. 3:3; Wis. 4:1; Zech. 6:13.

28 This is argued by D.L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*, SBL Monograph Series 26 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 132–136; also J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC 49 (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 110. For the main view, see: E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: MacMillan, 1947), 167; Van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, CNT3 (Kampen: Kok, 2005), 86; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BENT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 163; Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 126. Green interprets the term as referring to both dimensions, worshipping and proclaiming, at the same time (*1 Peter*, 62).

29 For further argumentation see Mark Boyley, “1 Peter—A Mission Document?,” *RTR* 63 (2004): 72–86 (80); see also Torrey Seland, “Resident Aliens in Mission: Missional Practices in the Emerging Church of 1 Peter,” *BBR* 19 (2009): 565–589.

30 The ‘spiritual sacrifices’ (πνευματικὰς θυσίας) align with a ‘spiritual house.’ They refer to a life in obedience to the will of God, more broadly: “‘Spiritual sacrifices’ is an all-encompassing expression which describes the variegated ways that Christians might serve God” (Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 623). This may include the suffering

The theme of Jesus' rejection (ἀποδοκιμάζω in verses 4 and 7), indicating low status, stands at the heart of the honour discourse in this pericope. However, Peter employs all sorts of vocabulary that, in contrast, marks the actual high status of Jesus and, by consequence, of his followers. Jesus is not just a stone; he is the living stone (2:4; λίθον ζῶντα), chosen and precious in God's sight (2:4.6; ἐκλεκτὸν ἔντιμον). And whoever believes in him will not be put to shame (2:6; cf. Isa 28:16; οὐ μὴ κατασχυνθῇ). For those who reject him, however, he became 'a stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall' (λίθος προσκόμματος καὶ πέτρα σκανδάλου), so leading to their own shame. But to the believers Jesus is precious (2:7; ἡ τιμή), and this also adds to the believers' honour which Peter denotes by terminology such as holy priesthood (2:5; ιεράτευμα ἅγιον), a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, called out of darkness into his marvellous light (2:9; ὑμεῖς δὲ γένος ἐκλεκτόν, βασιλείον ιεράτευμα, ἔθνος ἅγιον, λαὸς εἰς περιποίησιν, ὅπως τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐξαγγείλητε τοῦ ἐκ σκότους ὑμᾶς καλέσαντος εἰς τὸ θαυμαστὸν αὐτοῦ φῶς).³¹ They are God's people, who have received mercy (2:10; λαὸς θεοῦ, ἐλεηθέντες). Clearly verse 9 forms a climax in the honour discourse, aimed at strengthening the self-esteem of believers by a 'status reversal' according to God's rankings. The addressees of 1 Peter had abandoned giving honour to the gods they once worshipped. In its place, the God they now worship by following Jesus is the one who gives them honour.³² The honour discourse in the pericope emphasizes their high status in line with the high status of the rejected Christ. The envisioned task of proclaiming the mighty acts of God is, therefore, fully part of the status-enhancing language. As such, this witnessing task addresses in a direct way their loss of status caused by the social shaming they experience on a daily basis.

One may ask, then, whether the suffering of the addressees is implicitly or explicitly addressed here. Considering that a profound sense of shame and the loss of face is a severe form of suffering in itself,³³ and that sensitivity to honour dis-

of the addressees (So Eric Eve, "1 Peter," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddim (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1263–1270 (1266)); Laura Hunt, "1 Peter," in *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 527–543 (532).

31 Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 57.

32 For Peter's social creativity here in the construction of a powerful Christian identity, as well as for 2:9–10, using key terms from the vocabulary of ethnic identity, see Chapter 2 of this current volume by Kar Yong Lim, "Reading 1 Peter in Constructing Minority Identity." Longenecker sees a similar creative dynamic in his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, where, according to his interpretation, the deceased Christ-followers were said 'to be the ultimate embarrassment to and disqualification of the Christ assembly; the authors of the letter try to get ahead of that narrative by placing the deceased Christ-followers as key players in the story of their sovereign Lord.' Bruce W. Longenecker, "The Wrath of the Deities and the Privileged Deceased: Narrating Death in the Associational Rupture at Thessalonica," *NTS* 70 (2024): 98.

33 Klinker-De Klerck, "'For He Has Graciously Granted You the Privilege (...) of Suffering for Him': Honour Discourse as a Lens for Studying the Relationship Between God's Love and the Suffering of Christians," in *The Logic of God's Love. Explorations in Biblical and Systematic Theology*, ed.

course brings this shame into sharper focus, I would say that through the honour discourse their suffering is explicitly addressed and certainly in view with the call for witnessing in 2:9.

So That They May See Your Honourable Deeds (2:11–12)

Verses 2:11–12 follow the pericope just discussed. These verses connect the preceding passage with what follows and function as a heading for the subsequent instructions to various groups of people.³⁴ The aspect of witnessing is clearly present in this passage, explicitly linked to honourable conduct, as has already been made clear above.

The experiences of suffering are also explicitly referred to. The gentiles malign the addressees as evildoers (2:12; καταλαλοῦσιν ὑμῶν ὡς κακοποιῶν). Being slandered invokes a deep sense of shame, which may be regarded as the essence of their suffering. Their status of not belonging is also marked by foreigner terminology: the addressees are ‘foreigners’ and ‘sojourners’ (2:11; παροῖκοι καὶ παρεπιδήμοι).³⁵

The honour discourse in these verses addresses their shame explicitly. Peter begins by addressing his brothers and sisters as ‘beloved,’ after which he labels them as ‘foreigners and sojourners.’ However, there is an honourable flip-side to this foreigner terminology, because the assurance of Peter just one verse earlier still resonates in their ears and hearts: ‘once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.’³⁶ So, their becoming strangers to society is the honourable effect of their true belonging to the God of Israel. Peter’s next move is a call for a specifically Christian riposte to the shaming they undergo: the refusal to repay in the same currency – a stance he will encourage further on by calling upon the example of Jesus himself (2:22–23). At least, this is how some interpreters more specifically understand verse 11: ‘I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.’³⁷ In light of the overall honour discourse

Arnold Huijgen, Arjan van den Os, Eric Peels, and Dolf te Velde. *Studies in Reformed Theology* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2026), 198–217.

34 E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: MacMillan, 1947), 169. Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 693, pointing to the emphatic παρακαλῶ in verse 11.

35 See for a socio-political interpretation of this terminology John H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter; Its Situation and Strategy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). According to others, the terminology in 1 Peter has primarily ethical overtones (e.g., Van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, CNT3 (Kampen: Kok, 2005), 29–32 who stresses the Old Testament background of the vocabulary).

36 Echo of Hos. 1:9; 2:23.

37 Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*, SBL Diss series 160 (Atlanta: SBL, 1998), 102–104; deSilva “Turning Shame into Honor.” Based on parallel thoughts in the Greco-ethical and also in the Jewish tradition, however, most commentators interpret the expression ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν σαρκικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν in a general sense as abstention from all kinds of selfish and lower desires, belonging to the realm of physical, earthly life (E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St.*

in this letter, as outlined by deSilva (see above), this interpretation of the ‘desires of the flesh’ as more specifically referring to the ‘temptation to pay back evil with evil,’ seems plausible. Indeed, Peter exhorts the believers to honourable behaviour and good works instead (καλή ἀναστροφή; καλά ἔργα), so that the slanderers, by noticing this unexpected conduct, eventually may give honour to God (albeit at the end of times). The verb δοξάζω (‘give honour’) is clearly positioned antithetically to καταλαλέω (‘to speak ill of, to slander’), marking the possible drastic effect of the attitude Peter demands of the believers. The same holds for the false accusation of wrongdoing (κακοποιῶν) as opposed to the surprising reality of their good works (καλῶν ἔργων).

Clearly, such strategies are intended to strengthen the self-esteem of believers. But, even more, the witnessing aspect of it all can only exist because of the situation of shame. It is not the honourable conduct or the good works themselves that form the heart of the believers’ testimony. It is the Jesus-like attitude, the abstention from paying back evil with evil, the unexpected honourable turning of the other cheek, that clearly presupposes the socio-historical embedding of their real shame. Thus, once again, the themes of suffering and witnessing turn out to be strongly interwoven.

Winning Unbelieving Husbands (3:1–2)

These verses are part of a pericope (3:1–7) with instructions mainly for women in relation to their husbands. This pericope is part of a broader unit of instructions (2:11–3:12) that follows the ‘heading’ in 2:11–12, which I discussed above. The central thought running through this unit is the idea that Jesus-followers must submit to the authorities, even more so when suffering undeservedly. The unit is marked by the repeated use of the verb ὑποτάσσω (‘to submit’) for different categories of believers: all believers must submit to the authorities in 2:13, slaves to their masters in 2:18, and wives to their husbands in 3:1. In connection with the instruction for wives, Peter states a clear missionary objective: they may win (κερδαίνω) their unbelieving husbands for Christ (3:1–2).

There is no explicit suffering vocabulary related to the instruction for wives, except for the mention of possible fear in verse 6 (φοβούμεναι μηδεμίαν πτόησιν), which suggests a possible threat. This is quite conceivable in a situation where only the wife decides to follow Jesus while still under the authority of her non-believing husband. He may not always appreciate her choice and its consequences for the

Peter (London: MacMillan, 1947), 169; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 68; Van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, CNT3 (Kampen: Kok, 2005), 89; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BENT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 170; Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 132; Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 698–699).

social group the family belongs to.³⁸ Thus, the tone of the call for wives to submit to their unbelieving husbands may align with the general attitude described in 2:11–12, which is first elaborated more specifically in the pericope with instruction for slaves, prior to the instruction for wives:

If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

(2:20–23)

In 3:1–6, this 'submit-to-win' attitude of the wives is characterized as particularly honourable. Peter speaks of the 'reverence' and 'purity' of their conduct (τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφὴν ὑμῶν), which their husbands may notice (ἐποπτεύω, the same verb as in 2:12!). These wives' adornment is the inner self, with the lasting (ἄφθαρτος, 'incorruptible') beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious (πολυτελής, 'costly') in God's sight. The wives are even likened to daughters of Sarah, one of the holy women in the history of Israel. So, here too, the possible winning of their husbands by their 'embodied witness'³⁹ is an integral part of Peter's honour discourse, which aims to enhance their status and self-esteem. As such, it directly addresses their possible loss of status caused by the social shaming they may experience upon conversion to the Christian faith.

Always Prepared to Make a Defence With Gentleness and Reverence (3:13–17)

The last passage containing explicit witnessing terminology is 3:13–17. Peter exhorts believers to give a defence (ἀπολογία) of the hope they have, and their conduct (ἀναστροφή) is also linked to its effect on outsiders. The issue is whether the term ἀπολογία presupposes a judicial context (as, for example, in Acts 22:1,

38 Van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, CNT3 (Kampen: Kok, 2005), 112–113; Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 55–56. Religion in a household was transmitted through males with the *paterfamilias* as chief priest. Green refers to Plutarch, who states that a wife must worship the gods that her husband believes in and keep far from 'strange rituals' and 'outlandish superstitions' (*Moralia* 140D; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 92).

39 Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 170. Abdelmasih aptly defines their witness as 'passional missional ethos,' a key attitude for the whole group: 'Christ's passion serves as a model for believers, inspiring them to engage in acts of compassion and healing toward outsiders, ultimately bringing them into the fold of the Christian community.' (Mofreh Abdelmasih, "Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3" (master's thesis, Leuven, Evangelisch Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 118–120, (120)). See also Chapter 4 of this current volume by Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "Being a Christian Minority and Creating a Soft Difference."

25:16; 2 Tim 4:16)⁴⁰ or refers to ‘just the general and day-to-day experiences of being asked and questioned about their faith’ (as in, e.g., 1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Cor. 7:1).⁴¹ The latter interpretation is favoured by the specifications ‘always’ (ἀεί) and ‘to everyone who asks’ (παντὶ τῷ αἰτοῦντι ὁμᾶς λόγον), but that does not preclude the possibility that in some cases a judicial trial may have occurred.⁴²

The threat of suffering is evident in the passage, as shown by the varied terminology (verse 13: κακῶ – ‘maltreat someone,’ ‘hurt someone;’ verses 14, 17: πάσχω – ‘suffer;’ verse 14: φοβέω – ‘fear;’ verse 14: ταρασσώ – ‘trouble;’ verse 16: καταλαλέω – ‘speak evil;’ verse 16: ἐπηρέάζω – ‘threaten abusively’). Peter seems to be painting a more general, possible situation: ‘who will harm you if ... but even if you do suffer ... always be ready to ... if suffering should be God’s will.’

The shame of the suffering is addressed by the honour discourse in the pericope. Peter characterizes the believers’ behaviour as ‘good’ against the dark backdrop of the ‘evil’ actions of their opponents (verse 13; verses 16–17). Moreover, the believers themselves are honourably referred to as τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ζηλωταί – ‘zealots of the good.’ Specifically, Peter encourages them to give any defence with a gentle and reverent attitude, keeping a clear (good) conscience, characteristic of their honourable conduct (τὴν ἀγαθὴν ἀναστροφὴν). The intended effect is that their opponents will be ashamed (καταισχυνθῶσιν) of their slander. Shame is upon them, while the believers, even in their suffering, are blessed (verse 14: μακάριοι), thus completing the status reversal.⁴³ In their suffering for doing good, believers imitate their Lord, who also unjustly suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring them to God (verse 18).

In this passage, suffering is presented as a possibility. But even if it becomes real, believers are urged to give an honourable answer (or defence). Against the dark backdrop of suffering, such a reaction has the potential to put opponents to shame. In other words, ‘it is better to suffer while doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer while doing evil’ (verse 17, my translation). Because of the effect of contrast, their shameful situation is more than just an opportunity for proclaiming the gospel; it also encourages opponents to realize their own shame.

40 F.W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 164; Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, The Anchor Bible 37 (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 107; Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *1 Peter*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 154–156.

41 John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 627–628 opts for this latter interpretation and proposes to translate ἀπολογία by ‘reply,’ ‘answer,’ or ‘response.’

42 Torrey Seland, “Resident Aliens in Mission: Missional Practices in the Emerging Church of 1 Peter,” *BBR* 19 (2009): 588; E.G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (London: MacMillan, 1947), 193; Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 117; Van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, CNT3 (Kampen: Kok, 2005), 125; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BENT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 230; Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 201–202.

43 See also the contrast with 4:16 where the believers are told not to be ashamed (μὴ αἰσχυνέσθω) if they suffer ‘as Christians.’

In this way, not only the honourable conduct, but also the situation of suffering, turns out to be constitutive for the proclamation of the gospel. Understanding this, believers may know themselves as blessed in their shameful suffering.

This brief overview of witnessing passages shows that, at least at the level of the socio-historical setting of the letter, Peter's encouragement to witness through honourable conduct does not occur in a vacuum. The shameful situation being addressed is significant. Good deeds, as an unexpected response to the challenge of marginalization, produce a distinctive Christian testimony, with the painful situation being an integral part of this testimony. This is easily overlooked because it is not explicitly articulated on the surface of the text, but Peter's honour discourse, intended to strengthen the self-esteem of the addressees, reveals their deep shame as implicitly present, like 'an elephant in the room.'⁴⁴

Embedded in a Theological Reality

In what follows, I want to argue that what can be established as a socio-historical fact is embedded in a deeper theological reality. Since the painful situation of the addressees is not merely an opportunity for recruitment but rather an integral part of the testimony, it is also constitutive of the content of this testimony. But what does that mean? This is a question Paul reflected on from his own painful experiences as an apostle. In 2 Corinthians, for instance, Paul argues firmly that the suffering mode of his apostleship is an honourable one, truly witnessing to the gospel. Moreover, his suffering is a hallmark of true apostleship, as his attitude of 'cruciformity' provides a real-life portrayal, an 'embodied witness,'⁴⁵ of the character of God and Christ. Their cruciform love forms the basic pattern of his apostleship and, more broadly, of Christian life and conduct.⁴⁶ For Paul, this suffering, as well as the suffering of fellow apostles and believers, is embedded in the communion (κοινωνία) with the crucified and risen Christ, as evidenced by many syn-compounds in his letters (e.g., Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:11).⁴⁷

Could similar theological thinking regarding the theme of witnessing through suffering also be the background of Peter's encouraging honour discourse? Peter does refer several times to Christ, especially in the context of his exhortations to endure undeserved suffering honourably (2:21–24; 3:18–21). First, the sacrifice of Christ serves as the ultimate reason (2:21 and 3:18: ὅτι καὶ Χριστός) for the encouraged attitude. Second, the non-retaliating attitude of Christ himself serves as the

44 I borrow the image of the elephant in the room from a paper presented by E. Randolph Richards at the ETS Annual Meeting in San Antonio, 2023 ("Chupacabras and Elephants in the Room: The Perils and Blessings of 'Cultural Readings' of a Biblical Text").

45 See Ruth Anne Reese, *1 Peter*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 170 characterizing the conduct of the wives in 1 Peter 3.

46 On cruciform love as reflecting the character of God see Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

47 Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, "Paul's View on Christian Suffering: Honor Discourse as a Lens," *JSPL* 10.2 (2020): 136–137.

ultimate *exemplum* for the believers (2:21 ὑπογραμμόν). Third, a certain notion of communion or κοινωνία with the suffering and the glory of Christ is also referred to in 4:13 and 5:1, the only two instances in the letter where the vocabulary of κοινωνέω κτλ is used. How Paul envisions the unity between believers and Christ in suffering has been much debated over the centuries.⁴⁸ Even more difficult is determining whether Peter thought about it in a similar way.⁴⁹ He does not elaborate much on the theme, nor do any syn-compounds in 1 Peter clearly relate to this communion with the suffering Christ. Rather, the theme of suffering is theologically framed by notions of alienness and exile (1:1.17; 2:11) as a consequence of being God's own people.

Yet it seems fitting to conclude that the precise content of the witnessing Peter has in mind goes beyond a testimony of good works or honourable behaviour in line with what is customary in society. Rather, the honourable endurance of undeserved suffering, in imitation of Christ (*exemplum*), or even more powerfully, in communion with him (κοινωνία), forms the core of the testimony. It is precisely in the non-retaliating attitude⁵⁰ in a situation of shame that the character of Christ and the cruciform love of God become visible.

In short, in realizing that suffering is integral to proclamation, it becomes clear that the shameful social reality the addressees experienced is rooted in a deeper theological reality: following and sharing in the sufferings of Christ presents the good news of God's suffering commitment to a world-in-shame. It constitutes an embodied witness to God's character. Several statements in the letter underscore the plausibility of this claim. By his great mercy, God has turned towards the believers through the resurrection of Jesus Christ to give them hope and the prospect of eternal glory (1:3–4; 1:21) – Jesus being the living stone, rejected by men, but chosen and honoured by God (2:4). Around the rejected one, God chooses himself a people with the purpose that they proclaim his great deeds and excellence (2:9–10). They proclaim how God opposes the proud but exalts the humble, giving them grace (5:5–6; compare 3:12). So, if the addressees endure evil by doing good, this is a sign of grace (2:20: τοῦτο χάρις παρὰ θεῶ). For to this they have been called, because Christ also suffered for them, leaving them an example, so that they should follow in his steps (2:21). By following him, this grace will be visible to all.

48 Bloomquist provides an overview of the history of interpretation. L. Gregory Bloomquist, *The Function of Suffering in Philippians*, JSNTSup 78 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 18–70.

49 Dubis argues very specifically that the expression 'the sufferings of Christ' (4:13 τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν) refers to the reality of the so-called 'messianic woes,' a time of suffering and tribulation that would preface the advent of the Messiah (see, e.g., Ezek. 38–39; Dan. 7:21–27). Mark Dubis, *Messianic Woes in First Peter: Suffering and Eschatology in 1 Peter 4:12–19*, Studies in Biblical Literature 33 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); Williams and Horrell consider this unlikely because the same expression in 5:1 points very clearly to the sufferings that Christ himself experienced (1 Peter, 42–29).

50 This attitude is also clearly in line with the ethics of Jesus as demonstrated in the Sermon on the Mount.

Conclusion

There is a clear connection between the explicit call to witnessing in the letter and the situational context of suffering stemming from the minority position of the addressees. The audience of 1 Peter formed a religious minority in their pagan environment, finding themselves in a liminal existence between their former identities and their new identity in Christ. Because of their transgressive and destabilizing impiety, the group and its members were marginalized by their neighbours with the purpose of ‘rehabilitating’ them. Their marginalization resulted in an experience of deep shame, which Peter addresses through his honour discourse, a fine example of social creativity negotiating identities. Peter affirms the honour of the audience in every possible way. He also calls them to honourable conduct. Importantly, their honourable behaviour must play out against the background of the humiliating shame. It is precisely this that makes it typically Christ-like conduct. Thus, *both* the situation of suffering *and* the honourable handling of this situation are together constitutive of the believers’ witnessing to the gospel.

This insight strengthens the connection between the social and theological realities in which the hearers find themselves. Peter’s honour discourse seeks not only to address the social predicament but to lead them to fully make use of this predicament for the proclamation of the gospel, not as an occasion but as an essential component of that proclamation. The social creativity is anchored at a deeper theological level, their minority position and their actual suffering being an essential theological core of their identity and vocation as Jesus followers. Only in this way can the addressees proclaim – and, even more powerfully, present – the typically cruciform love of God.

4 Being a Christian Minority and Creating a Soft Difference

Perspectives on 1 Peter From a Social Identity Complexity Perspective

Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok

Abstract

This contribution explores the challenges Christian minorities face in maintaining their identity within the context of majority religions like Islam, particularly amid tension and marginalization. Using Social Identity Complexity Theory, it critically analyzes two case studies: a social scientific exegetical study of a biblical text (1 Peter) and the lived experience of contemporary Christian minorities in Egypt via autoethnography. The research examines the challenges involved in the negotiation of identity in historical and modern contexts in times of threat. The contribution to scholarship lies in the combination of these approaches and methods, offering insights into how Christian minorities preserve their distinct identity while navigating coexistence in diverse and often hostile environments.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory, Social Identity Complexity Theory, autoethnography, soft difference, Christian Egyptian minority, identity negotiation

Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to reflect on the forms of social identity complexity that Christian minorities could resort to in the setting of a majority context dominated by another religion, for instance Islam, especially in the face of social tension or marginalization, and viewing its vocation in the face of a threat to identity distinctiveness. To critically conduct this study, we make use of Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT) to analyze a case study from a source document of early Christianity contained in the canonical New Testament (1 Peter) and to critically correlate that with a case study of a Christian minority group in contemporary Egypt. The method of analysis of past experiences will consist of social scientific exegesis, including via a social identity complexity theoretical approach, and the method of analysis for present experiences will consist of autoethnography.

The contribution begins with a theoretical introduction, followed by two main parts in which we critically reflect on 1) the chosen case study from the past (1 Peter) and 2) the chosen case study of the present, concluding with a reflection

from an emic perspective on challenges experienced by a minority Christian group in contemporary Egypt from a critical correlation perspective.

Theoretical and Conceptual Design

Critical Correlation between Past and Present Experiences

In our analyses, we are inspired by a form of critical correlation between past and present experiences that is partly inspired by the work of Paul Tillich and Edward Schillebeeckx and refined by Jacobus (Kobus) Kok.¹ This approach recognizes that Christian faith is rooted in its source texts, which were shaped by specific socio-historical contexts that are different from those of today. Both past and present Christian communities face ‘contrast experiences’ or ‘critical negativity,’ moments requiring meaning-making through narrative and metaphor.

The method involves studying biblical texts within their original socio-historical contexts, exploring the questions they addressed and the socio-cognitive metaphors they employed to create a coherent underlying narrative structure.² It also entails critically examining contemporary contexts and correlating these with biblical texts to inspire relevant insights. Schillebeeckx argued for interpreting Scripture through questions arising from modern experience while preserving its essence.³ Similarly, Tillich emphasized correlating present existential questions with biblical answers such that it maintains the message of the biblical texts in a new context.⁴ This process ensures Christianity’s foundational experiences (‘Christelijke grondervaring’) remain constant, enabling biblical elements to structure contemporary Christian experiences as they did for biblical authors, thus ensuring continuity in the Christian tradition.⁵

SICT as Heuristic Tool

In the process of critical correlation, it is important to heuristically make use of a theoretical lens that is consistent. In our case, we will make use of SICT for both the analysis of the past and the analysis of the present. This choice relates to the

1 See Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1974); Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dutch Reformed Church” (PhD diss., Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2016).

2 See Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 35–40.

3 Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1974), 146–147. See also Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dutch Reformed Church” (PhD diss., Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2016), 28.

4 See Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dutch Reformed Church” (PhD diss., Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2016), 28–42.

5 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Tussentijds verhaal over twee Jezus boeken* (Bloemendaal: Nelissen, 1978), 60–61, cited in Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dutch Reformed Church” (PhD diss., Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2016), 38.

current state of the art in theoretical approaches to social-scientific exegesis of the New Testament, as well as the use of this theory in contemporary studies in social-psychology.⁶

SICT in Social Psychology and Its Reception in New Testament Studies

Henri Tajfel and John Turner were the main theorists that developed Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theory. This theory analyzes and describes that part of a person's identity that is the result of the group(s) to which he or she belongs.⁷ At the group level, Social Identity Theory (SIT) investigates how groups categorize, evaluate, and differentiate themselves in comparison with outgroups and to what extent there are similarities between groups. Groups are often in competition with each other, and Tajfel and Turner have observed that difference is often magnified, and similarities underplayed in group conflict contexts.⁸ They have observed that ingroup members would often put overemphasis on the similarities that the group members share and downplay the differences amongst the ingroup members. This serves as a mechanism to enhance group cohesiveness over and against outgroups.

Roccas and Brewer's SICT and Kok's Use of It in New Testament Studies

Over the years, the field of SIT has seen growth and development. More recently, Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer have built on the work of Tajfel and Turner and developed SICT. They differentiate between four ways in which a person or group could represent the interrelationship and nestedness⁹ of their multiple ingroup identities and where or how they overlap or not.¹⁰

In the field of New Testament Studies, Kok was the first to make use of this theory (SICT) for heuristic use in New Testament studies.¹¹ Several others have since followed,¹² but this theoretical approach is still in its early days. Roccas

6 In New Testament Studies, Philip Esler (in works 1994–1996) was the first to see the potential for making use of SIT in New Testament Studies. Subsequently, over the last three decades or so, it has grown into a whole specialized field in New Testament Studies. In recent years, we have seen the publication of the *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (edited by J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, 2014) and the *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament* (edited by J. Brian Tucker and Aaron J. Kuecker, 2020) as well as a whole series of commentaries on the New Testament being produced as we speak with Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

7 Jack Barentsen, "Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika Van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 59–73, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048556434>.

8 Rupert Brown, *Henri Tajfel: Explorer of Identity and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2019).

9 'Nestedness' is a term used in SIT research to refer to overlapping identities, like a Russian doll.

10 Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6.2 (2002): 88–106, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01.

11 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "Social Identity Complexity Theory as Heuristic Tool in New Testament Studies," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 70.1 (2014): 1–9.

12 See, for instance, Elizabeth K. Hunt, "Intergroup Conflict and Social Identity in Galatians: An Exegetical Analysis," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 8.1 (2018): 236–247; see also as

and Brewer differentiate between the following, which for the sake of clarity we simplify considerably here:

- (1) Intersection: a person recognizes ingroup membership only where specific overlap occurs, such as a female church minister viewing only other female ministers as her ingroup.
- (2) Dominance: a dominant identity subordinates others, such as a female minister who prioritizes her identity as a minister over gender, recognizing both male and female ministers as ingroup members.
- (3) Compartmentalization: a person maintains multiple, contextually activated identities. For example, a Zulu chief's son may switch between his Western corporate identity and his traditional Zulu identity based on context, compartmentalizing the two.
- (4) Merger: the most complex model, where multiple, non-convergent identities are embraced inclusively, and the person's social identity combines all their group identifications. This model transcends specific sub-identities, often blurring the distinction between ingroup and outgroup, and promoting a superordinate identity.¹³

Heuristically, these models prompt key questions for 1 Peter: does the author reduce identities to a single exclusive model, restrain inconsistencies through dominance, activate compartmentalized identities, or create a more complex, inclusive superordinate identity?

Exegesis of 1 Peter

Historical Background of the Letter and Its Purpose

Several contributions in this volume address 1 Peter, so we will briefly outline our approach and key perspectives without delving into its historical background. We agree with most scholars that 1 Peter is a circular letter from the latter first century,¹⁴ attributed to Peter,¹⁵ one of Jesus' closest disciples and a pillar of the church (Matt. 10:2; Mk. 3:16; Lk. 6:14). The letter, sent from Rome (1 Pet. 5:13) via Silvanus (1 Pet. 5:12), addresses Christians in Asia Minor (1:1), depicted as exiles and strangers,¹⁶ a minority under pressure.

part of the Special Issue of the journal *Religions* entitled "Exploring the Complexity of Identities and Boundaries in the New Testament and Related Literature," the article by Paul N. Anderson, "Negotiating Complexity Within the Dialectical and Cosmopolitan Johannine Situation," *Religions* 15.6 (2024): 1–21.

13 See Sonia Roccas and Marilyn B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6.2 (2002): 88–106, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01.

14 See detailed discussion Mark A. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 480–486.

15 For the sake of convenience, we will refer to the author as Peter.

16 The nature of the recipients' identity, whether literal or metaphorical, is a subject of debate. John H. Elliot and Karen Jobes argued for a literal understanding of these terms. However, others, such as

The letter is addressed to Christians who were gentiles before their conversion (1:14, 18; 2:12; 4:3-4), clearly identifying them as members of an out-group in respect to Judaism. We need to note that by the time 1 Peter was produced, the Christ-following movement was still a Jewish movement and the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism had not taken place in full force. Recent studies refocus attention in reading New Testament texts as forms of inner-Jewish texts, written mainly by Christ-following Jews.¹⁷ 1 Pet. 2:10 emphasizes that the readers were previously ‘not God’s people.’ Interestingly, the author employs metaphors associated with Israel to help these new believers understand the legacy of their identity. One prominent metaphor used is that of exile, which is applied metaphorically to these new Christ-followers.¹⁸ Due to their conversion, the recipients of 1 Peter experienced suffering unofficially, in the sense of pressures that were not state initiated, as scholars commonly acknowledge,¹⁹ but also perhaps officially. Refusal to conform to Greco-Roman culture and the imperial cult led to accusations of disloyalty and atheism (1:14, 18; 2:17, 20; 3:15; 4:3-4, 14),²⁰ clashing with societal norms on slavery, gender roles, and social order (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11). This caused verbal abuse (2:12, 20; 4:14), physical violence (2:20; 3:6), and threats of legal action (3:15-17; 4:15-16).²¹

The recipients of 1 Peter are presented as having faced intense suffering, shaking their identity and faith in God’s plan. Peter urges them to stand firm in grace (5:12),²² affirming their identity as God’s chosen, sanctified by the Spirit, and redeemed through Christ’s sacrifice (1:2). They are sketched as being reborn as God’s children through his Word (1:23).²³ God is the source of salvation,²⁴ achieved through Christ’s sacrificial death, not material means (1:18-19). Faith in the resur-

Horrell and Williams, among others, see it as metaphorical. See on this discussion Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on 1 Peter in 2 Volumes: Volume 1: Chapters 1-2*, The International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 220-225. This present contribution sees it as metaphorical.

17 See Michael Bird, Ruben Bühner, Jörg Frey, and Brian Rossner, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Perspectives on Paul and Jewish Identity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 507 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023).

18 Mark A. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 484.

19 Mark Dubis, “Research on 1 Peter: A Survey of Scholarly Literature Since 1985,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 4.2 (2006): 199-239 (203).

20 Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on 1 Peter in 2 Volumes: Volume 1: Chapters 1-2*, The International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 1:241-249.

21 Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on 1 Peter in 2 Volumes: Volume 1: Chapters 1-2*, The International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 1:260-261.

22 Mark A. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 485.

23 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 49-50.

24 J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), lxviii.

rected Christ (1:3) secures eternal life, and Christ models obedience and faithful endurance in suffering (1:17–20; 2:21).²⁵

Through metaphors like being God's family, Christ's flock, and healed by his wounds (2:24), Peter emphasized their transformation. Salvation is both present and future, a reality lived out by growing in faith, imitating Christ's humility, and anticipating its ultimate fulfilment at Christ's return.²⁶

Social Scientific Exegesis of 1 Peter

In 1 Peter, believers are initially depicted as living in ignorance, adhering to futile ancestral traditions, and engaging in sinful behaviours such as idolatry and drunkenness (1:14, 18). They were once outside God's mercy, not part of His people – lost and wandering without direction (2:10, 25). However, their conversion marks the beginning of moral progress and re-socialization.²⁷ Amidst dislocation and alienation, they receive a new identity as members of God's family, a metaphor that runs throughout the letter,²⁸ redeemed by Christ's blood and included in a holy nation (2:9–10). The underlying socio-cognitive metaphorical frame (drawing on Lakoff and Johnson)²⁹ of a family is often missed, but once one becomes aware of this, the underlying picture of a family clearly emerges, as seen in Figure 4.1.³⁰

Believers are spiritually nourished like children, growing in their salvation and righteousness, compared to infants being fed by the Word and cared for by a loving Father (1:3, 23). Believers are called to imitate Christ, portrayed as their shepherd, guiding them towards moral growth (2:24–25).³¹

25 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 50.

26 Mofreh Abdelmasih, "Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3" (Master's thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 41–43.

27 Jan G. van der Watt, "Salvation in the Gospel According to John," in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 122–127. Van der Watt discusses the Gospel of John; however, the same process can be found here.

28 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 115–129 (120). Elliott shows that the familial imagery is prominent in 1 Peter and 'pervades' throughout: See in this regard John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 37B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 418.

29 See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

30 This illustration is taken from Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 121.

31 Mofreh Abdelmasih, "Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3" (Master's thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 116.

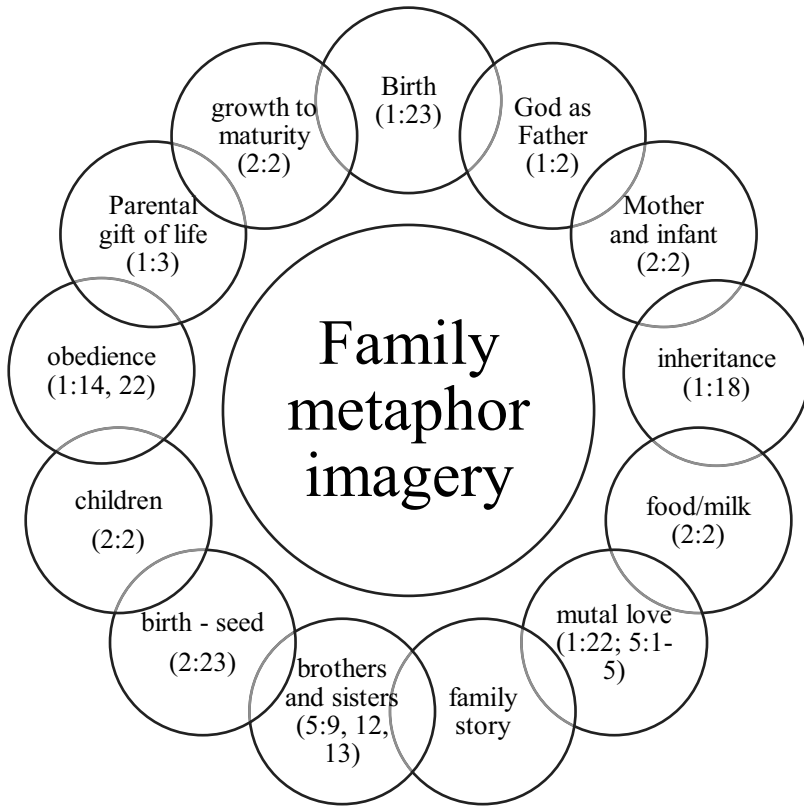


Figure 4.1 Family Metaphor (J. Kok, 2023)

This new identity transforms believers, urging them to live a transformed life and reflect their status as God's children. They are called to follow Christ's example of humility, gentleness, and non-retaliation, embracing suffering as he did (2:21–23). Their conversion signifies an internal change and a journey of moral and ethical transformation, where they continually grow in faith by imitating Christ. Salvation encompasses past, present, and future aspects, and they are encouraged to align their lives with their new identity (1:3).³²

In 1 Peter, believers are called to live in accordance with the new life they received through Christ's resurrection (1:3). Despite the persistence of sin, they are urged to grow and develop by emulating Christ (2:21). This concept of *imitatio Christi* is central throughout the letter.³³ By following Christ's example, they

32 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 51–52.

33 J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 49 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), lxx–iii–lxxiv.

are not just encouraged to ‘do good’ but are entrusted with the responsibility to positively influence others. Just as Christ’s suffering reconciled sinners to God, believers actively participate in God’s redemptive mission by imitating the behaviours that Jesus demonstrated in his salvific work, striving for Christlikeness.³⁴ Their journey begins with Christ’s resurrection and culminates in his return, requiring active, gospel-centred living.³⁵

In 1 Pet. 3:1–6, converted women are evident through the term ἄφθαρτος, meaning ‘imperishable,’ in 3:4, which echoes 1:22. They are now part of God’s family, as indicated by Peter referring to them as τέκνα.³⁶ These women face challenges in their marriages to unbelieving spouses, grappling with their new identity as ‘sojourners and resident aliens’ (2:11) because of their faith. In Greco-Roman society, wives were expected to worship their husbands’ gods.³⁷ As a result, their conversion to Christianity often provoked opposition from their husbands, who viewed it as an act of defiance.³⁸

Now faced with marriages to unbelieving husbands (ἀπειθοῦσιν τῷ λόγῳ), these women are encouraged to submit to them, reflecting a cultural expectation rooted in ancient patriarchal values.³⁹ The purpose of their behaviour is clarified in the ἵνα (so that) purpose clause: to lead their unbelieving husbands potentially to accept the Christian faith.⁴⁰ This approach aims to bring husbands to faith, expressed as κερδηθήσονται, a missionary term synonymous with ‘save,’ as seen in early church conversion practices (cf. Matt. 18:15; 1 Cor. 9:19–22).⁴¹

34 For more on imitation in 1 Peter, see Katie Marcar, “Following in the Footsteps: Exemplarity, Ethnicity and Ethics in 1 Peter,” *New Testament Studies* 68.3 (2022): 253–273 (272), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688521000424>.

35 Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (Master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 117.

36 See Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, Society for New Testament Studies-Monograph Series 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 257–258.

37 E.g., see Plutarch, *Advice* 140.19; cited in Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 204. Bruce W. Longenecker also asserts that ‘devotion within the household was structured by the householder, with others in the household needing to fall in line with the devotion dedicated by him.’ See Bruce W. Longenecker, *In Stone and Story: Early Christianity in the Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 218.

38 Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 204.

39 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 126; Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on 1 Peter in 2 Volumes: Volume 2: Chapters 3–5*, The International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 17.

40 Travis B. Williams and David G. Horrell, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on 1 Peter in 2 Volumes: Volume 1: Chapters 1–2*, The International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 2:11.

41 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 126.

The instruction to wives in 1 Peter emphasizes internal adornment over external appearance, aligning with virtues valued in the surrounding culture.⁴² Abraham Malherbe notes that while Christian sentiments may resemble those found in some philosophical or moral writings of the time, the underlying motivations and understanding of identity differ significantly.⁴³ Like those addressed in 1 Peter, early Christians viewed themselves as children of God, born into a new family, which shaped their ethos towards insiders and outsiders. Malherbe further emphasizes that the early Christian authors sought to clarify the theological rationale for Christian conduct, helping readers understand their identity and ethos.⁴⁴ These behaviours are not merely isolated actions but rather expressions of the family ethos, which finds its essence in Christ.

In this context, Peter's response differs from the norm by refusing to seek retaliation for insults.⁴⁵ Instead of repaying evil with evil, he advocates for honourable conduct that can silence (and shame; see Matt. 5:5–9) critics and potentially convert them. He emphasizes that their dignity as members of God's family and their solidarity with Christ ensure that those who endure shame receive divine honour. Wives are encouraged to submit to unbelieving husbands with humility, viewing suffering as an opportunity to honour God and join Christ's mission. They are called to a priestly ministry and mission, offering themselves as living sacrifices in worship, word, and deed.⁴⁶

Inclusion and Openness toward the World: Social Identity Complexity Analysis

As believers join God's family, their identity undergoes a significant transformation, contrasting their past and present states. In 1 Pet. 2:10, the author highlights

42 See, e.g., Seneca, *Ep., Ad Helv.* 16.3–4; Juvenal, *Satires*, 6.457–463; 495–511; Tacitus, *Ann.*, 3.54; i.a. cited in Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter*, ed. Eldon J. Epp, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 211–12; Achtemeier also cites *1 En.* 8:1 and *T. Reu.* 5:3.

43 Abraham J. Malherbe, "Ethics in Context: The Thessalonians and Their Neighbors," in *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter Roth, and Christopher Hays, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 364* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 187–208 (205, 207). See this idea in Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 127.

44 Abraham J. Malherbe, "Ethics in Context: The Thessalonians and Their Neighbors," in *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter Roth, and Christopher Hays, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 364* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 207.

45 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "Hope and Bridge-Building Leadership in a Post-COVID-19 Context: Insights from 1 Peter," in *Theological Perspectives on Re-Imagining Leadership in Post-COVID-19 Africa*, ed. Philip La G. du Toit and Alfred R. Brunsdon (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2023), 69–87 (82).

46 David M. Shaw, "A People Called: Narrative Transportation & Missional Identity in 1 Peter" (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2017), 255. Shaw argues that this begins when believers are called to holiness based on God's character (cf. 1:13–21).

this shift with the adverbial phrases ‘once’ (ποτε) and ‘now’ (νῦν), emphasizing the new identity they have embraced. The text serves as a tool to affirm and strengthen this newly acquired sense of self and belonging within the group through self-categorization for the ingroup.⁴⁷ However, by defining the believers’ identity, the text also implicitly excludes others. The author incorporates the Jewish exile narrative (1:1) to transcend former social boundaries, integrating previous outsiders, like pagans, into this renewed family, symbolizing a new identity and community.⁴⁸

The author contrasts the group’s identity with that of the outgroup, emphasizing the distinctiveness of the believers’ lineage and inheritance to strengthen their sense of belonging. This divine lineage, rooted in heaven, is portrayed (note the meta-contrast principle) as purer and more enduring than earthly origins, that is qualitatively superior to any lineage on earth. Despite being set apart as holy priests that establish significant ‘socio-cognitive distance between the ingroup and outgroup,’⁴⁹ thus delineating distinct boundaries between the ingroup and the outgroup to which they were previously associated.⁵⁰ Yet, as Kok argues, these boundaries are like a ‘semi-permeable cell’ (cf. 1 Pet 2:9; 3:15; 4:11).⁵¹ Hunt also similarly asserts that ‘the boundary is permeable, but only in one direction.’⁵²

The transition from darkness to light, initiated by God’s call, creates porous ingroup boundaries, emphasizing a key missional intention: potentially integrating outgroup members. The implication is that Christ’s followers, viewed as ‘aliens and exiles,’ still engage with those considered ‘pagans’ from an insider’s perspective and even subject themselves to the ‘outsider’s’ perspective. They live and function among outsiders while being part of a new, esteemed holy kinship group, yet they often retain elements of their former secular identities. This highlights the challenge believers face in balancing their diverse, overlapping identities,

47 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 118–119.

48 Todd D. Still and Natalie R. Webb, “‘Aliens’ among ‘Pagans’, ‘Exiles’ among ‘Gentiles’: Authorial Strategy and (Social) Identity in 1 Peter,” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 455–472 (464).

49 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 122.

50 Laura J. Hunt, “1 Peter,” in *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 527–542 (533). See also in this regard Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 122.

51 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 122.

52 Laura J. Hunt, “1 Peter,” in *T&T Clark Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Aaron Kuecker (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 533.

requiring a careful and nuanced approach to managing the complexities of their social identity.⁵³

In 1 Pet. 3:1–6, we see how believers, now part of God’s family, are connected to Israel’s narrative through Sarah, the matriarch, evoking a shared memory that deepens their sense of belonging to Israel’s spiritual story. Here, it is evident that believers are navigating a nested identity.⁵⁴ They find themselves grappling with the multifaceted dimensions of their identity and contemplating how to navigate these complexities. At the core of 1 Peter’s message is the idea that believers, as holy members of God’s family, are to follow Christ’s example. Just as Christ submitted for the greater purpose of salvation, believers are called to do the same, contributing to the community’s mission by inviting others, including unbelieving spouses, into the faith.⁵⁵

These verses aim to reduce the perceived threat to distinctiveness that might arise from interactions with non-believers, marking a shift from traditional Jewish concerns about preserving ethnic purity. In writings like Ezra and *Jubilees* (e.g., Ezra 9:1–2; *Jub.* 22:16–24), there is a strong emphasis on maintaining Israel’s ethnic purity, with deep concern over the potential dilution of its identity through intermarriage,⁵⁶ seen as a threat to the community’s sanctity. Despite these historical precedents that stress strict ethnic boundaries, the author of 1 Peter encourages believers to maintain marital bonds with those outside the faith, using societal norms and values to support this inclusive perspective. Maintaining such marital bonds, *ipso facto*, entails the necessity of a social identity complexity.

Katie Marcar argues that Christian ethnicity, unlike traditional forms, does not rely on hereditary traits that require protective measures. Instead, it is primarily defined by faith rather than lineage.⁵⁷ This perspective challenges established notions of ethnic identity, offering a nuanced alternative to societal constructs. While believers may still be recognized by conventional markers like genealogy or national origin, their deep connection to God *redefines and transcends* these

53 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 122. Kok here cites Hunt, “1 Peter,” 533.

54 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 123. Here, “nested identity” is understood as the coexistence of multiple identities within one another.

55 Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (Master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 122.

56 Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, Society for New Testament Studies-Monograph Series 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 241.

57 Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, Society for New Testament Studies-Monograph Series 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 241–242.

earthly boundaries, rooting their identity in the broader spiritual narrative of divine descent.⁵⁸

This contribution does agree with the claim that 1 Peter wants to create a new *fictive* ethnic and/or fictive family group, but not such that it ‘nullifies’ or abrogates other ethnic or familial sub-identities. We want to state the case that 1 Peter redefines the criteria for belonging to the family of God, which is rooted in the historical narrative of Israel. This implies that Christ-following Jews retain their ethnic identity, while Christ-following gentiles also maintain their ethnic distinctiveness without abrogating it. As Marcar correctly asserts, entry into this spiritual family comes through divine regeneration rather than ethnic birth.⁵⁹

David Horrell argues, as Marcar, that New Testament texts like 1 Peter promote an ethnic understanding of Christianity,⁶⁰ drawing on Denise Kimber Buell’s interpretation of ethnicity.⁶¹ However, this view has received some critiques that need to be addressed.

Philip Esler critiques Horrell’s argument on ethnicity by pointing out the key differences between Jewish and Christian practices related to descent. While these practices may appear similar, they operate in distinct ways. For example, circumcision is a physical (ethnic) marker of belonging to the Jewish community, whereas baptism is a spiritual rite signifying entry into the Christian faith.⁶² Moreover, Christianity is an (intentional) missionary movement that focuses on attracting and including outsiders, as seen in 1 Pet. 3:1–6. In Paul’s writings, non-Jewish Christians are regarded as spiritual descendants of Abraham through faith, not ethnic lineage. This shift from ethnic descent to spiritual belief makes Christianity an inclusive movement, separate from any specific physical ethnic identity or physical lineage. Esler argues that in Galatians, Paul redefines Abraham’s significance, moving away from the emphasis on physical descent central to Judean ethnic identity. Moreover, Esler argues that detaching or de-linking from the land (Jn. 4:21; Heb. 11), Christianity becomes more inclusive, embracing individuals from more

58 Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, Society for New Testament Studies-Monograph Series 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 90.

59 Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 123.

60 See David G. Horrell, “Ethnicisation, Marriage and Early Christian Identity: Critical Reflections on 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Peter 3 and Modern New Testament Scholarship,” *New Testament Studies* 62.3 (2016): 439–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688516000084>; however, in this article Horrell asserts ‘We should not, however, hastily and simplistically conclude that early Christian identity “is” therefore “ethnic,” or that the early Christian groups were “ethnic groups”; such box-like categorization is unlikely to be either cogent or illuminating.’ See also David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

61 Denise K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

62 Philip F. Esler, “Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities,” *Expository Times* 133.7 (2022): 284–289 (288).

diverse ethnic backgrounds. As a result, Paul offers not an ‘ethnicization’ but rather a ‘de-ethnicization.’⁶³

This contribution agrees with Esler, but also wants to emphasize the inclusive character of Christian identity, and the way that it functions as a superordinate spiritual ethnic category – one that not only transcends but also reconfigures prior physical ethnic affiliations, asserting a form of SICT dominance over them, while remaining open to members of all ethnic backgrounds without abrogating these previous ethnicities.⁶⁴ Thus, this contribution proposes a third way between Horrell’s and Esler’s understandings of the nature of Christian identity. In this regard, SICT offers a helpful framework for grasping the complexity of these overlapping and interacting ethnic identities. It helps to see several layers of identity dynamics happening at the same time.

Scholars like Janette H. Ok, agreeing with Horrell and Marcar, suggest that 1 Peter presents Christian identity through ethnic reasoning to foster solidarity among socially alienated converts.⁶⁵ Ok, however, underplays the fact that 1 Peter emphasizes both internal cohesion and the outreach to outsiders, expanding the conceptual boundaries of the community. This can be better understood through SICT, which suggests that 1 Peter achieves unity not only by spiritually ‘ethnicizing’ Christianity but by merging different identities, preserving ethnic distinctions while fostering cohesion within the superordinate and inclusive ‘family of God’ conceptual metaphor.⁶⁶

63 Philip F. Esler, “Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities,” *Expository Times* 133.7 (2022): 288.

64 The discussion between Horrell and Esler pivots on the distinction between literal and non-literal. For Horrell, the metaphorical understanding of ethnicity here cannot be taken as merely a metaphor but also as ‘real.’ As he argues that

[O]ne of the implications of this ‘constructionist’ view of ethnic and racial identities is that it becomes much more difficult to distinguish between ‘real’ ethnic or racial groups and those that use ethnic discourse in a fictive or metaphorical way. All claims to kinship at the scale of ethnic or racial group are, in some sense, fictive.

David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 90.

See also on this discussion Katie Marcar, *Divine Regeneration and Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Mapping Metaphors of Family, Race, and Nation*, Society for New Testament Studies-Monograph Series 180 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 49.

65 Janette H. Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Who You Are No Longer*, Library of New Testament Studies 645 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021). She came to the conclusion for further research after trying to apply her findings to Asian Americans Christians, asking ‘How then can the letter of 1 Peter offer any sort of exhortation or consolation to Asian Americans Christians, who wish to shed the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner and be seen as a vital and integral part of the national identity while maintaining their ethnic identities?’ Janette H. Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter: Who You Are No Longer*, Library of New Testament Studies 645 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021), 93.

66 We argue that Christianity is inclusive; however, inclusivity does not abrogate previous ethnicity. The dynamics might take the form of several forms of complexity, as SICT also points out. Simple binary in-out and either-or are problematic.

This contribution advocates for a more nuanced interpretation using SICT. Historically, Christianity began as a Jewish movement but evolved into a broader boundary transcending identity,⁶⁷ especially after the destruction of the Temple. This shift allowed for the inclusion of both Jews and gentiles, forming one unified humanity under the fatherhood of God. Jewish identity remains central in this framework, but the author of 1 Peter – as a Jew – combines this heritage with a form of submission to contemporary cultural norms to shape a new complex identity. This new identity transcends but does not negate, abrogate, or nullify previous sub-identities; rather it infiltrates them. Jewish Christ-followers remain Jews who believe in a crucified, Jewish Messiah. Gentiles become part of a larger Jewish story, namely, following the Jewish God and his crucified and resurrected son, Jesus. Earliest Christianity did not entail supersessionism. But the ethnic terms in which the new movement developed were later used in ways to enforce a separation of ways. At the time of the writing of 1 Peter, such parting of ways had not yet happened.

In navigating these complex identities, Jewish and gentile believers in 1 Peter are called to find unity through their shared identity as members of the superordinate family of God. This identity reflects the fulfilment of Israel's salvation history and offers a soteriological path for non-Jews to become followers of Christ, thus being recognized as 'children of God.' Thus, this identity construction redefines the criteria for belonging to God's people, with divine regeneration as the primary means of inclusion.

In 1 Peter, it becomes evident that while believers may still be recognized by traditional identifiers such as genealogy or national origin, their deep connection to God fundamentally redefines and dominates over or transcends these earthly distinctions. This connection situates their identity within the broader spiritual framework of divine descent. The inclusive superordinate identity in Christ includes distinct traditions: for example, Jewish lineage and narrative alongside the gentiles' ethnic tradition that includes different ethnicities with their own ethnic heritage. Both of these are represented in the spiritual lineage of the fictive ethnic family of God, which transcends but does not negate the believer's backgrounds. Roman wives are not asked to un-become Roman wives, for example. They are to stay in their calling (cf. also 1 Cor 7:17–24, esp. v. 20).

In this context, Christianity does not require individuals to abandon their ethnic groups; rather, it encourages them to remain within them and even excel therein.⁶⁸

67 See Michael Bird, Ruben Bühner, Jörg Frey, and Brian Rossner, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Perspectives on Paul and Jewish Identity*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 507 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023).

68 William S. Campbell, "Unity and Diversity in the Church: Transformed Identities and the Peace of Christ in Ephesians," *Transformation (Exeter)* 25.1 (2008): 15–31 (15). Campbell argues that 'Pauline transformation in Christ does not mean the creation of a new group without ethnic identity but rather the transformation of those who are Greeks into transformed Greeks, and of Judeans into transformed Judeans in Christ.' Naturally, Pauline examples cannot be transposed into 1 Peter, but the case studies may be compared as examples of literature from the second half of the first century.

Every ethnic and national group is by implication welcomed and invited to maintain its identity while being transformatively united through the new family of God, which surpasses it on a superordinate level. Surpassing is not the same thing as abrogating. It is a social identity complexity lens that helps one to see how the complexity and even the paradox of sub-identity can be conceptually transcended and maintained at the same time. Being part of a new family while at the same time being a wife of a Roman husband can happen and be maintained at the same time, the dynamics of which are explainable in SICT.

This leads us to propose the dominance or merger models of SICT and not that of intersection or compartmentalization with regard to 1 Peter's strategy. The merger model is further illustrated by the integration of Roman household codes with Jewish cultural narratives leading to a complex identity with superordinate metaphors able to nest sub-identity. However, the dominance model might also be argued for when it comes to the 'in Christ' identity that stands above these identities and wants to transform sub-identities from within. We see the minority community in 1 Peter embracing inclusivity, affirming that belonging to the family of God does not negate one's identity as gentile or Jewish. This concurs with Miroslav Volf's observation that in 1 Peter we find a 'soft difference.'⁶⁹ The author of 1 Peter, writing as a Jew, addresses the challenges of maintaining distinctiveness, by encouraging wives to remain with their husbands. This approach highlights how their new identity transcends ethnic distinctions (Jewish and non-Jewish) in favour of a more encompassing or superordinate identity within the socio-cognitive metaphorical frame of the inclusive family of God that transcends particularities.

Autoethnographic Analysis

This section presents an emic analysis of a contemporary Egyptian experience through an autoethnographic approach (by Mofreh Abdelmasih), drawing on SICT. First, the method of autoethnography, based on the work of Julian Müller and Sheila Trahar, is introduced.⁷⁰

69 See Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 15–30. In this article, Volf engages with the arguments of John H. Elliott and David L. Balch. He rejects Elliott's sectarian interpretation of 1 Peter, while also opposing Balch's assimilationist stance. Instead, Volf advocates for a middle ground, which he terms 'soft difference.' Later, in his essay "Between Conformity and Resistance: Beyond the Balch–Elliott Debate Towards a Postcolonial Reading of 1 Peter," Horrell reflects on the Balch–Elliott debate and proposes an alternative approach, which he refers to as 'polite resistance.' See David G. Horrell, "Between Conformity and Resistance: Beyond the Balch–Elliott Debate Towards a Postcolonial Reading of 1 Peter," in *Becoming Christian: Essays on 1 Peter and the Making of Christian Identity*, ed. David Horrell, Library of New Testament Studies 394 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 211–238.

70 J. Müller and S. Trahar, "Facing our Whiteness in Doing Ubuntu Research: Finding Spatial Justice for the Researcher," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.1 (2016): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3510>.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that blends aspects of autobiography and ethnography. This approach is designed to relate the self with others, the socially embedded context.⁷¹ This method interrogates the self, its values, beliefs, and its practices. It also entails a journey of discovering multiple layers of consciousness as the personal is connected to the cultural in a form of critical correlation.⁷² This approach situates individual life stories within broader socio-historical dynamics, using personal narratives as primary data to explore the interplay between individual and group identities and larger social phenomena.

Through introspection and reflexivity, the autoethnographer interrogates subjective positionality and biases, fostering transparency in interpretation. The process seeks to generate new insights into cultural norms, power structures, and social issues. Autoethnography can take various forms, including written narratives that critically engage with individual or group identities.

In this case, we employ autoethnography alongside SICT and a hermeneutical reading of 1 Peter to analyze identity within Egypt's minority Evangelical Christian community. Social identity complexity serves as a heuristic lens to explore observed dynamics from an emic perspective, while critical correlation and social scientific hermeneutics provide a framework for understanding how 1 Peter has been used by the Christian Evangelical community in Egypt to construct identity and address threats to identity distinctiveness. This approach sheds light on the nuanced interplay between biblical texts, identity formation, and social realities.

My Autoethnographical Narrative Journey (by Mofreh Abdelmasih)

From an early age, we were made aware of our distinctiveness as a minority group in a Muslim majority context. At a very early age, all children receive a seal – a tattoo of a cross on the arm. Our family surname reveals our heritage. My last name, Abdelmasih (in Arabic عبد المسيح), literally means 'slave – or servant – of Christ.' Rural Egypt is still influenced by group-oriented Mediterranean social values.

During my time in seminary, I studied ancient Mediterranean social values and noticed an intriguing parallel between these values and the cultural context in which the Bible was written. This insight revealed how similar our collectivistic culture is to the one depicted in the Bible. The complexity faced by early Christ-followers, who were minorities navigating their identity within a predominantly non-Christian society, mirrors our own experiences. They had to reconcile their Christian faith with their various cultural backgrounds and, in some cases, with

71 Faith W. Ngunjiri, Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, and Heewon Chang, "Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research," *Journal of Research Practice* 6.1 (2010): 1–17 (3); "J. Müller and S. Trahar, "Facing our Whiteness in Doing Ubuntu Research: Finding Spatial Justice for the Researcher," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.1 (2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3510>.

72 J. Müller, "Postfoundational Practical Theology in a Time of Transition," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67.1 (2011): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i1.837>.

marriages to non-Christians as in 1 Pet. 3:1–6. Similarly, in Egypt, we Christians face challenges living in a predominantly Muslim society while maintaining our Egyptian identity. We encounter additional complexity as Evangelicals because we identify as ‘Evangelical Coptic Christian Egyptians,’ a designation that underscores our multifaceted identity. This complexity parallels the challenges found in the New Testament, particularly in texts like John and 1 Peter.⁷³

Later, during my Master’s in New Testament Studies at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven, I received training in SIT and its heuristic application in New Testament social-scientific exegesis. For the first time, this provided me with the theoretical language and models to interpret how my minority group in Egypt navigates social identity complexity.

Allow me to illustrate this with a narrative. In secondary school, during religion class, Muslim and Christian students attended the same national school. Still, Christians, as the minority, left the main class to attend a separate Christian religious class. It was here that I first heard the assertion, ‘We are the original citizens of this land. This country was Christian.’ This statement highlighted the distinction between Muslim Egyptians as outsiders and Christian Egyptians as the original inhabitants, emphasizing the religious aspect of our identity over the national one. The term ‘Coptic,’ which means ‘Egyptian,’ has both religious and national connotations, but the focus is often on the religious side due to the marginalization Christians face. As a result, our dominant self-descriptive social identity became ‘Coptic Christian’ rather than ‘Egyptian nationality.’ This marginalization leads to a stronger cohesion within our group to resist external pressures. In this context, texts like John and 1 Peter are frequently referenced to emphasize that we are not part of the world and should expect persecution from outsiders. These Scriptures are often preached in church on Sundays, reinforcing boundaries against the out-group and solidifying our distinct identity as Christians.

In conversations outside of religious classes at school, both Muslim and Christian teachers emphasize our Egyptian identity as the dominant one. Conversations about unity are also evident in villages, where neighbours often say, ‘We are all Egyptian. We are one; there is no difference.’ I have heard and said these many times to my Muslim friends. This is also evident in the famous motto ‘long live the crescent with the cross,’ (يحيا الهلال مع الصليب) which was used during the 1919 revolution against English colonization to unite Egyptians. It continues to be used in formal religious gatherings among religious leaders.

However, within the Christian ingroup, we identify primarily as Christians rather than Egyptians. As a pastor, I observe this clearly in churches where the Egyptian identity is rarely mentioned explicitly; we define ourselves as Christians. This is why you will not often see the Egyptian flag in many churches. Creating a superordinate identity is particularly challenging for us as a minority. Research on social identity complexity and distinctiveness threat indicates that a minority

73 Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (Master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024).

tends to prioritize religious identity over a national one, mainly due to the high threat the minority might perceive to its identity distinctiveness.⁷⁴ Thus, the fear of losing our unique identity makes it difficult for us, as a minority, to embrace a broader national identity. This explains why we often define ourselves as Coptic rather than Egyptian, as we gravitate towards our ethnic-religious identity. While research shows that communities with higher social identity complexity tend to be more inclusive, achieving this requires open boundaries and a genuine willingness to engage with others.⁷⁵ However, in a highly collectivist context like ours, where there is significant overlap between religious and national identities for Muslim Egyptians, this often leads to greater exclusivity as well as the threat of distinctiveness. These factors limit the potential for openness and inclusivity.

The intergroup relations between the Evangelical minority and the Orthodox majority Christian group in Egypt demonstrate the Coptic community's closed boundaries and exclusivity. I observed clear conflicts as a pastor serving in a village with both Orthodox and Evangelical churches. Orthodox villagers frequently questioned the validity of our baptism and marriage rituals. Meanwhile, members of my Evangelical church often felt marginalized, perceiving that their identity was considered inferior to that of the Orthodox, whose rituals were deemed more legitimate.

To address this, I focused on elevating our ingroup by emphasizing our Reformed tradition and critiquing Orthodox practices in an effort to create ingroup solidarity and also differentiation and boundaries. However, in leadership gatherings, we often heard leaders, including Pope Tawadros II, Pope of Alexandria, emphasize our shared Christian identity, saying, 'We are all Christian. We have the same Bible and one Christ.'⁷⁶ This rhetoric, which underscores our boundary transcending commonalities as Christians, is crucial in fostering a sense of unity and common purpose. Yet, within each subgroup, the discourse shifts. When speaking among themselves, both Orthodox and Evangelical leaders highlight doctrinal differences, particularly regarding communion and baptism. The Evangelical movement in Egypt, initiated by American missionaries, often aims to convert what are termed 'nominal Coptic Orthodox Christians' to Evangelical faith, which has heightened tensions and led each group to emphasize their distinct rituals and

74 Edona Maloku, Belle Derks, Colette van Laar, Naomi Ellemers, "Stimulating Interethnic Contact in Kosovo: The Role of Social Identity Complexity and Distinctiveness Threat," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 22.7 (2019): 1039–1058, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430218808884>. In this article, the researchers focus on the context of Kosovo as a case study to show how the Serbian minority leans toward the ethnic identity over the national one, and this leads to the failure to create a superordinate identity.

75 Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6.2 (2002): 88–106, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01.

76 In this video, Pope Tawadros II addresses a question regarding the different Christian denominations. See Pope Tawadros II, "The Opinion of Pope Tawadros II about the Christian Denominations," YouTube, video, 19 May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcOMbU6GvZs> (accessed 9 May 2024).

practices more strongly.⁷⁷ This complex interplay of factors presents a challenging dynamic to understand. It clearly illustrates the heightened distinctiveness threat faced by subgroups in such a context of complexity and how, as a reaction to external threats, they reinforce stricter boundaries within their own group. However, is there hope for reconciling these different identities without diminishing one over the other? Being Coptic, for instance, does not negate being Egyptian, nor does being Evangelical negate being Coptic. A more inclusive approach and openness (amongst other things by means of superordinate identity) could serve as a solution, promoting harmony between identities. This kind of inclusivity is reflected in texts like 1 Peter and its use of the socio-cognitive family metaphoric, which may offer valuable guidance.

Critical Correlation between Past and Present

Upon examining 1 Peter critically and thoughtfully, we recognize that early Christians might have shared similar experiences to minority Christians in Egypt when it comes to social pressure and distinctiveness threat. Just as these early Christians faced marginalization, persecution, and neglect, so do minority Christians in Egypt. This text compels us to reflect on our identity and vocation as a minority community, positioning it as a formative resource for our lives.

Moreover, 1 Peter encourages inclusivity and integration within society, reminding us that being Christian does not negate or abrogate our Egyptian identity. This understanding would empower us conceptually to identify more closely with other subgroups within Egypt. Whether one identifies as a Coptic Evangelical Christian or a Coptic Orthodox Christian, we all belong to the same superordinate ‘family of God.’

1 Peter encourages what we can call a ‘missional incarnational identity’⁷⁸ meaning that in times of complexity, the church vocation should be inclusive and more open towards the world and the other groups in order to bring light and follow the steps of Christ who reconciled people with each other and with God the Father.

Conclusion

We examined 1 Peter through the lens of SICT, revealing that it exemplifies a dominance when it comes to being ‘in Christ’ and a merger model when it comes to

77 Hornsey and Hogg propose that ‘the minimization of the distinctiveness threat is a prerequisite for harmonious subgroup relations. Social harmony is most likely to be achieved by maintaining, not awakening, subgroup identities, provided they are nested within a coherent superordinate identity.’ See Matthew J. Hornsey and Michael A. Hogg, “Assimilation and Diversity: An Integrative Model of Subgroup Relations,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4.2 (2000): 143–156 (143). In the context of the case study, it appears that the emphasis on distinctiveness tends to foster exclusivity.

78 Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (Master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2024), 118–120.

the cultural traits of the different ethnicities of the group, blending Jewish traditions with the cultural context of Asia Minor. SICT research also shows that a person or group can use different strategies of dealing with complexity on several levels and in several contexts. These are not static but dynamic and pluriform in nature. We postulate that 1 Peter steers away from forms of SICT compartmentalization and sectarian boundary drawing SICT intersection. This is especially exemplified in the case study of 1 Peter and believing wives of unbelieving husbands who are asked to act in an exemplary manner according to common outgroup values.⁷⁹ 1 Peter promotes an overarching boundary transcending inclusive ‘family of God’ identity, redefining membership without erasing or abrogating previous identities. Individuals can remain Jews or Greeks while joining the new family. SICT, a further development within SIT, better explains the complexity of nested identities and provides new insights into identity integration. This is rather remarkable, given the reality of an ancient group-oriented world that often functioned in binary ingroup versus outgroup dynamics. When read through a SICT lens, these texts can be used as texts to facilitate social cohesion, inclusion, and tolerance.

In our autoethnographic reflection on contemporary experiences within a Christian community that is a minority (evangelical Christians within the larger Coptic Orthodox majority) in a Muslim-majority Egyptian context, we observed that Copts often prioritize religious-ethnic identity over national identity due to their minority status. This is driven by a perceived threat to their distinctiveness, leading to stricter boundaries within their communities.

Amid social tension, the challenge for minority Christian communities is balancing inclusive and exclusive ethos. An inclusive ethos integrates the group with society, while an exclusive ethos maintains boundaries between ingroups and outgroups.⁸⁰ 1 Peter encourages firm identity boundaries but also promotes a soft, inclusive ethos, discouraging sectarian withdrawal. It does not call for compartmentalization or intersection, but rather a balance of identity that transcends boundaries.

For Egypt’s Christian minority, adopting an inclusive mindset, modelled in 1 Peter’s family metaphors, could foster unity and a striving towards inclusivity on two levels: one on intra-group level and one on inter-group level. This fictive kinship metaphor can lead to the fostering of inclusivity towards the other sub-Christian ingroups in Egypt as we are all under the higher order identity ‘in Christ.’ When it comes to the majority Muslim group, we are all seen as Egyptian, an identity construction that functions similarly to the merger model. Such identity construction may be encouraged, especially insofar as it does not negate the ‘in-Christ identity’ and the difference of the Christ-following community and the ‘soft difference’⁸¹ they are called to embody.

79 See the important distinction between inclusive and exclusive ethos in Michael Wolter, *Theologie und Ethos im Frühen Christentum: Studien zu Jesus, Paulus und Lukas*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 236 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 129.

80 Michael Wolter, *Theologie und Ethos im Frühen Christentum: Studien zu Jesus, Paulus und Lukas*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 236 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 129.

81 See also the pioneering work of Noura Eid, “Soft Difference: Intersectional Social Identity Complexity in First Peter” (Masters thesis, Leuven, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, 2022).

TRANSPARENCY DISCLAIMER: Some parts of this paper contain material from the unpublished Masters thesis of Mofreh Abdelmasih, written under the supervision of Jacobus Kok at ETF Leuven [Mofreh Abdelmasih, “Restorative Presence in a Hostile World: A Comparative Analysis between John 4 and 1 Peter 3” (Master’s thesis, Leuven, Evangelisch Theologische Faculteit, 2024)] and is reused here with permission. Since both authors are non-native English speakers, Grammarly and ChatGPT (versions 2024 and 2025) were used solely to sharpen the language and style of the paper. Author contributions: Kok designed the conceptual frame of the paper and laid the theoretical foundation, and Abdelmasih implemented these by writing and, afterwards, conducting language editing of the chapter with the help of AI tools.

5 Identity, Persecution, Pilgrimage, and Exile

The Role of 1 Peter in Shaping the Discipleship Journey of MBBs through the Come Follow Me Course

Pat Brittenden and Parsa Zarin Ghalam

Abstract

This contribution explores the impact of 1 Peter's teaching on the discipleship journey of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) through the Come Follow Me (CFM) course, a tailored discipleship resource addressing their unique spiritual needs. Within Islamic contexts, MBBs often face social, political, and religious isolation. The CFM course incorporates 1 Peter's themes of identity, persecution, pilgrimage, and exile, equipping MBBs to navigate these lived challenges. Using the personal narratives from five MBBs, this contribution highlights how this course fosters identity transformation. By examining these journeys, the study offers theological, sociological, and anthropological insights into the broader Christian experience of pilgrimage, minority identity, suffering, and the paradox of living as pilgrims yet indigenous, conversing with the teachings of 1 Peter.

Keywords: 1 Peter, Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), Come Follow Me (CFM) course, liminal identity, persecution, pilgrimage

Introduction

This contribution explores the pilgrimage journey of MBBs from or within majority-Muslim Islamic contexts. In particular, we investigate the influence of 1 Peter's teaching on the discipleship journey of MBBs through the Come Follow Me (CFM) course. This original discipleship programme is crafted to meet the spiritual and practical needs of MBBs who have converted from Islam to Christianity. Such individuals often experience not only social but also political and religious isolation, facing significant opposition from family members, local communities, and state authorities. Thus, discipleship for MBBs is both a deeply personal and a profoundly communal challenge, making the CFM course particularly valuable as it seeks to equip MBBs to navigate these challenges through a structured engagement with 1 Peter.

We begin by discussing the origin of the CFM course, its educational design, and the theological themes that underpin its lessons. 1 Peter's themes of identity, persecution, pilgrimage, and exile are integrated into the course framework to support MBBs as they experience their journey from Islam to Christianity. These themes are not only biblically rich but also highly relevant to the lived experiences of MBBs, offering theological resources to understand and process their newly found faith within their communities as a meaningful part of their Christian pilgrimage. The personal narratives of five MBBs who completed the course serve as case studies that illuminate how CFM's teachings have shaped their discipleship journeys. Their stories reveal both the challenges and the transformations they experience as they endeavour to reframe their identity and find strength amid persecution.

The research questions that guide this contribution are as follows: how has the CFM course facilitated the discipleship journey of MBBs, particularly in light of 1 Peter's teachings? In what ways do the themes of pilgrimage, suffering, and exile resonate with MBBs' experiences? How has the course's teaching framework contributed to the formation of a new Christian identity for MBBs? The contribution concludes by examining critical themes relevant to MBB faith journeys through theological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives. It offers insights not only into the particular experiences of this cohort of MBBs but also into the broader MBB experience of pilgrimage, minority status, and identity transformation based on the teachings of 1 Peter. Additionally, it explores the paradox of being both in the world and not of it, as well as being both pilgrims and indigenous, a dynamic intrinsic to the broader Christian narrative.

The CFM Course: Origins, Design, and Theology

The CFM course is a tailored discipleship programme designed specifically for MBBs living in predominantly Muslim contexts. Originally developed for Afghan MBBs by a highly experienced scholar-practitioner, Dr Tim Green, in collaboration with Afghan believers and international Christian leaders, the course integrates insights from discipleship and theological training. CFM is intended for new believers or those approaching conversion, focusing on the Trinity and the deity of Christ, and presenting Christianity as distinct from the legalistic framework of Islamic *sharī'a*. It equips MBBs to navigate key theological differences and cultural challenges, fostering a Christian worldview and supporting their spiritual journey.

The CFM course comprises 20 lessons that address both the theological and practical challenges faced by MBBs, including topics such as divine grace, forgiveness, and salvation. For individuals shaped by the doctrinal framework of Islam, CFM offers a transformative perspective on faith, through the support of a nurturing community. Each lesson is thoughtfully crafted to enable participants to explore Christian beliefs within a context that feels familiar while remaining faithful to Scripture, helping them develop a new identity in Christ.

The educational design of the CFM course is rooted in the TEE¹ methodology, structured into three key steps. First, participants engage in active self-study using the course material. Second, they interact with others in a small group, facilitated by a leader, typically meeting once a week. Third, they apply the teachings in their daily lives. To ensure security, the course avoids explicit references to Islam, instead implicitly addressing Islamic teachings by presenting biblical alternatives. Lessons draw meaningful parallels between Muslim concepts and Christian practices, encouraging reflection. Group discussions and practical exercises provide opportunities to share insights, apply lessons in real-life contexts, and foster a Christ-centred community.

CFM is especially impactful for MBBs who endure significant trials after conversion. Theological themes from 1 Peter – such as identity in Christ, suffering, and witness – provide a meaningful framework for interpreting these hardships as integral to their faith journeys. By highlighting the concepts of pilgrimage and mission, CFM encourages participants to see their faith journey as one marked by both purpose and exile. This perspective enables them to share in Christ's suffering while finding solidarity and support within the Christian community.

The programme's extensive reach is demonstrated by its translation into over 30 languages, highlighting its adaptability and appeal across diverse cultural contexts. By fostering a community where participants can integrate biblical teachings with their personal narratives, CFM offers a safe and supportive environment for MBBs to redefine their identities and navigate their faith transitions collectively. This holistic approach empowers MBBs to reflect on their past experiences while embracing their new Christian identities, promoting both personal and communal growth rooted in faith.²

Research Methodology

Applied missiology³ served as the primary disciplinary lens for this research, providing a foundational framework for understanding the complexities of MBB identity and discipleship. Characterized by the practical application of missiological theories to real-world contexts, applied missiology allows for an in-depth exploration of the intersection between faith, culture, and the challenges MBBs face in

1 Traditionally – from its genesis in the 1960s onwards – TEE was an acronym for Theological Education by Extension. However, Dr Tim Green prefers it as an acronym for Tools to Equip and Empower.

2 More information on CFM can be found on the Word of Life website, <https://www.come-follow-me.org> (accessed 20 August 2025).

3 Missiology is the reflective discipline that undergirds and guides the Christian Church's mission to/with/among all people, everywhere. The focus of missiology is on the outward motion of being sent, going, and being senders. This is well described by David J. Bosch when he writes, 'The term mission presupposes a sender, a person sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment.' David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1–2. Applied missiology is therefore the application of this 'being sent' dimension of Christian identity and purpose that finds its origin in Christian Trinitarian theology. It was Jesus himself who authorized the sending: 'As the Father has sent me, so send I you' (John 20:21).

their faith journeys. In addition to missiology, the study is supplemented by relevant sociological and anthropological tools and concepts, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of the participants' experiences. These disciplines offer insights into the social dynamics, cultural contexts, and community relationships that shape MBBs' identity and faith journeys, particularly in environments characterized by the complexities of persecution and cultural marginalization.

This investigation employed a qualitative thematic methodology, primarily utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews with five MBBs who have completed the CFM course. Recognizing that participants sometimes struggled to answer questions directly, we invited them to share stories related to their experiences, allowing for a richer exploration of their perspectives. This approach also incorporates elements of narrative analysis, reflecting on the significance of personal stories in shaping their discipleship journeys. Additionally, secondary data was collected from an interview with Dr Tim Green, the author of the CFM course. As a MBB from Iran, I (Parsa Zarin Ghalam) incorporate my voice and personal experiences, undergirding the narratives with reflections on my spiritual lived experience and adding depth to the interpretation.

The interviews with MBB participants were conducted via Zoom, each comprising two parts and lasting approximately 90 minutes.⁴ The first part focused on the participants' faith journeys from Islam to Christianity, providing insights into their contextual backgrounds. The second part explored their experiences with the CFM course. The interview with Dr Tim Green, also conducted via Zoom, lasted about 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded to identify key themes and patterns emerging from the participants' narratives in relation to our research questions. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of their lived experiences and the relevance of the course material to their identities as MBBs.

The research sample for this study includes five MBB participants from diverse backgrounds, each with distinct personal and spiritual journeys that reflect the range of their origins and current contexts. These participants – three men and two women, aged between 30 and 45 – come from countries with deeply rooted Islamic traditions, namely Sudan, Somaliland, Pakistan, and Yemen. The number of years that each has been a Christian varies significantly, with some having been Christians for only a few years and others for more than two decades. Notably, all but one of the MBBs lived in diaspora contexts due to severe persecution, and most were actively engaged in ministry within majority-Muslim contexts.

- Mohammed,⁵ a Sudanese MBB who resides in Egypt, is deeply involved in a local Baptist church, where he serves as a mentor and teacher to other MBBs. He converted to Christianity during his university years, an experience that sparked his interest in discipleship.

⁴ These interviews were conducted between 5 and 24 September 2024.

⁵ All participants have been pseudonymized.

- Ahmed, originally from Somaliland, currently lives in Ethiopia, where he works among Somali-speaking Christian communities. His role involves mentoring and discipling new believers through the CFM course.
- Leila, a Pakistani MBB living in Malaysia, has been a Christian for over 15 years. She uses her background in teaching to conduct discipleship courses in Urdu, aiming to support other MBBs in their faith journeys.
- Mustafa and Fatima, a Yemeni couple who have settled in Malaysia, share a commitment to discipleship within their families and communities. Both have embraced CFM as a framework for teaching and mentoring other MBBs in their network.

As mentioned above, as part of this study, we interacted with Dr Tim Green, author of the CFM course. With decades of experience in discipling MBBs and studying their lived experiences, Dr Tim Green, who completed his PhD on identity issues among MBBs in Pakistan,⁶ offered valuable insights into the course's development and purpose.

Main Research Findings

The research methodology provided a detailed framework for examining the individual and context-specific experiences of participants, highlighting both personal and collective aspects of their lives. By focusing on personal narratives, our study captured the complexities of some MBBs' lived experiences and revealed recurring themes and patterns that are observable in wider discussions emerging in MBB-focused literature.⁷ Our approach helped uncover the relationships between personal experiences, environmental influences, and identity development, which were integral to our study's main findings, which we set out below.

First Encounters with CFM

The CFM course has been introduced to MBBs across various contexts, addressing the complex challenges associated with converting to Christianity. Mohammed, a refugee in Egypt, first encountered the course when a mentor introduced it as a

6 Tim Green, "Issues of Identity for Christians of a Muslim Background in Pakistan" (PhD diss., Department of Near and Middle East Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2014).

7 See for example, Tim Green, "Issues of Identity for Christians of a Muslim Background in Pakistan" (PhD diss., Department of Near and Middle East Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2014); T. Green, "Beyond the C-Spectrum? A Search for New Models," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37.4 (2013): 361–380; Jens Barnett, "Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?" in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere In Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 53–66; and Patrick Brittenden, "Liberating Liminality in the Contemporary Church of Algeria," in *Between Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouch and Michael McKay (place of publication: Lexington, 2023), 37–53.

discipleship resource. He found CFM's simplicity beneficial, as it enabled him to grasp foundational Christian teachings on topics like suffering and the cost of following Christ. The course provided him with a framework to interpret his persecution as part of the Christian journey, deepening his understanding of discipleship.

Ahmed, who ministers to Somali MBBs in Ethiopia, discovered CFM as a useful tool for discipleship within his community. Recognizing its relevance, he translated the course into Somali, expanding its accessibility and making it available to new believers. Leila, who encountered CFM in Malaysia through Dr Tim Green, appreciated the course's clarity. For her, CFM bridged the gap between Islamic teachings and Christian beliefs on forgiveness and love, particularly regarding complex theological concepts that are often difficult for new believers.

For Mustafa and Fatima, the course helped them transition from Islam to Christianity, guiding them through the challenges of persecution while fostering their personal relationship with God. All the participants use CFM to disciple other MBBs in their community, creating a supportive environment where new believers can grow in faith.

New Identity in Christ and Its Transformative Impact

One of the most significant ways CFM impacted the participants was in shaping their new identity as followers of Christ. For these MBBs, their conversion to Christianity represented a radical departure from their former lives, and the course helped them navigate this transition by offering clear teachings on what it means to be a follower of Christ. The concept of a new identity in Christ was particularly impactful for the participants, many of whom struggled with feelings of rejection and isolation after leaving Islam.

CFM also fosters their new identity in Christ by encouraging MBBs to navigate both continuity and discontinuity with certain dimensions of their Muslim faith and heritage. For Mustafa, this shift was profound, as he found himself developing a greater sense of serenity. 'I feel more peace in my heart now. I love others,' he shared. By offering practical lessons on living out the Christian faith, CFM helps MBBs navigate their new life in Christ, particularly amid ongoing persecution.

Addressing Persecution and Dealing with Suffering

CFM plays an important role in shaping the discipleship journey by directly addressing the inevitability of persecution and the costs of discipleship. For participants, the experience of persecution is not only anticipated but also a constant reality. Mohammed highlighted how CFM prepared him to face the challenges of being a Christian in a predominantly Muslim society. By addressing the inevitability of persecution, the course enabled him to view his suffering as part of his Christian identity, encouraging resilience and courage.

The theme of suffering was central to the experiences of the MBBs we interviewed, many of whom face persecution and rejection for their faith. CFM addresses this theme directly, helping those who complete this course to understand that

suffering is integral to following Christ and a vital part of the discipleship journey. Ahmed, imprisoned for his faith in Somaliland, reflected on how the course helped him make sense of his suffering. He shared, ‘Jesus tells you that He has already suffered for us ... we are no better than Him and those who came before us.’ This realization strengthened his resolve to continue following Christ, giving him the theological grounding to endure persecution with patience and faith.

Similarly, Fatima highlighted the struggles faced by Yemeni believers amidst war, economic and social hardships, explaining that although life in Yemen was extremely difficult, the MBBs had ‘light in this darkness,’ representing Jesus as their hope in difficult circumstances. This understanding of suffering, framed within the broader Christian narrative of enduring hardship with hope and resilience, allowed participants to accept their suffering not as a burden but as a defining element of their faith journey. The course’s teachings on suffering and perseverance were thus pivotal in shaping their identity as followers of Christ, helping them embrace suffering as a natural and essential part of their discipleship.

Simplifying the Bible’s Message

The course provides participants with a clear sense of purpose and direction in their discipleship journey. For Leila, CFM simplified complex biblical concepts, making them accessible to new believers unfamiliar with Christian teachings. She noted, ‘If you are a new believer, it is hard to understand the Bible ... but the course simplifies that ... with examples given, which are easy to understand.’ This clarity helped bridge the gap between Islamic beliefs and Christian theology, a crucial feature for MBBs navigating unfamiliar teachings.

Knowing God as Father

Further deepening their discipleship journey, the course reshaped participants’ understanding of God as a loving Father, contrasting sharply with the image of God they had previously known in Islam. Ahmed, for instance, spoke about the relational aspect of God as Father, which starkly contrasts with the Islamic view of Allah. He reflected, ‘Somali Muslims ... have 99 names of Allah, but none of them is the Father. So that is really special and tells us that we have this close connection with God.’ This understanding of God as Father deepened these participants’ personal relationship with God and gave Ahmed a sense of belonging and love he had not experienced in his previous religious tradition.

Fatima also expressed how this shift impacted her faith, stating, ‘We feel like we are close to God, because He’s a Father now, not a boss, ... we didn’t love God before, we just followed Him out of fear.’ This new relational perspective fostered a more intimate and meaningful walk with God in Christ, helping participants grow in their faith and discipleship, moving away from the fear-based obedience of their past towards a grace-filled, loving relationship with God. The course thus guided them towards a more profound, personal experience of discipleship rooted in love, grace, and relational connection with God.

Pilgrimage and Exile

The theme of pilgrimage is especially significant for MBBs who have experienced displacement. Mohammed, who fled Sudan and now resides in Egypt, spoke about how CFM helped him understand his status as a pilgrim of Christ. While he recognized his official status as a refugee, the course taught him to see his true identity in Christ. He explained, 'I don't feel like a refugee in reality ... God has called me to this journey.' This understanding of pilgrimage, rooted in 1 Peter's teachings, allowed Mohammed to embrace his displacement not as a burden but as part of his Christian calling. For Mohammed, the course reframed the experience of exile and displacement as a spiritual pilgrimage that mirrored the journey of Christ and the early Christians.

In addition to addressing suffering, CFM also emphasizes the theme of exile, which is particularly relevant for MBBs who have been forced to flee their home countries due to persecution. Mustafa and Fatima, asylum seekers in Malaysia, spoke about how the course helped them navigate the challenges of living in a foreign land while maintaining their faith. The course provided a framework for understanding their suffering and alienation, helping them reconcile their dual identity as earthly foreigners and heavenly citizens. Mustafa explained it this way, 'We need some security, but we don't want our fear to be more than our faith.'

From Legalism to Grace and Love

For our participants, the course played a crucial role in their discipleship journeys by helping them differentiate between their experience of Islam as a legalistic approach and becoming followers of Christ as an experience of grace-orientation. Mohammed noted how the course clarified the distinction between the rigid rules of Islam and the freedom found in Christ, explaining, 'In Islam, I had a set of rules ... I had to obey ... but in Christianity, it is different.' This was a transformative moment in his discipleship, as it reshaped his understanding of grace and the relational nature of Christianity. Unlike the rule-bound structure of Islam, discipleship in Christianity, as presented by the CFM, focuses on a personal relationship with Christ built on love and grace. This highlights the law of love, guiding MBBs not towards unrestricted freedom but towards a commitment to live according to Christ's teachings.

Resolving Conflict and Enabling Forgiveness, Love, and Reconciliation

Another critical aspect of the course is its focus on forgiveness and love, which directly challenges the cultural expectations many MBBs bring with them from their previous religious traditions. Ahmed explained how the CFM course helped him reframe his understanding of revenge, which had been deeply ingrained in his culture. He noted, 'Our Lord Christ taught us ... we should not take revenge but pray for those who persecute us.' This lesson on forgiveness challenged his worldview and helped him cultivate a new approach to dealing with conflict that was

rooted in love and humility rather than retaliation. This transformative approach to relationships was echoed by several other participants, who noted that the course had reshaped their interactions with others, both within their families and in their wider communities.

CFM helped participants develop a more profound sense of wholeness (or shalom) and spiritual resilience. Mustafa, for example, shared how the course had helped him cultivate a sense of tranquillity in his heart, particularly in the face of persecution and rejection. This transformation was particularly significant for participants who had previously struggled with anger and resentment against those who had persecuted them, as it helped them adopt a more Christ-like approach to interactions with their persecutors.

CFM also has had a discernible impact on the personal lives and relationships of the participants, fostering significant changes in how they interact with others. One of the most notable transformations was how participants approached conflict and reconciliation, particularly within their families. Leila highlighted how the course reshaped her interactions with her family, particularly in moments of conflict. She explained how her anger toward her family for attacking her husband, due to his new faith in Christ, lessened through the teachings of the course, which emphasized forgiveness over revenge: ‘I changed my attitude ... I prayed for them. I forgave them.’ Several participants discussed how their conversion to Christianity transformed their understanding of family and their relationship with their spouses and children. Mustafa mentioned how praying together as a family was a new experience after conversion and increased the quality of his daily interactions with his family members.

The CFM course played a crucial role in helping participants repair and strengthen their relationships with others, particularly within the Christian community. Mustafa, for example, described how the course helped him develop humility and kindness in his interactions with fellow believers. He explained, ‘We learned how to fix our problems as Christian friends, ... to be humble with each other and kind.’ This emphasis on reconciliation and mutual support strengthened their personal relationships and reinforced their identity as part of a Christian community that values forgiveness and humility. The course’s teachings on relationships and reconciliation have also had a transformative effect on the participants’ personal lives, fostering peace, forgiveness, and a Christ-centred approach to relationships.

Insights from the Author of CFM

In an interview with the author of the CFM course, Dr Tim Green,⁸ he shared that insights from a 2006 consultation on challenges faced by MBBs served as the seedbed for CFM. During that consultation, key discipleship themes emerged, including identity, pilgrimage, persecution, and cultural issues such as marriage, magic, and folk Islam. These insights informed the development of the course, with

8 This interview was conducted with Dr Tim Green by the authors on 8 November 2024.

Dr Tim Green selecting 1 Peter as its foundational biblical book. He valued 1 Peter for its alignment with these themes and its structured chronological presentation of theological topics, such as the Trinity in Chapter 1, which established a foundational theme for MBBs.

Reflecting on the 2006 consultation and the request for specific teaching on the Trinity, Dr Tim Green remarked, ‘I wouldn’t necessarily have begun with that complex topic at the beginning of the course ... But 1 Pet. 1, in the very first three verses, takes you straight into the Trinity.’ He further noted, ‘It is interesting that the concept of God as Father is foundational in this letter.’ This emphasis resonated with our interviews, where participants consistently identified the theme of God as Father as both foundational and central to their discipleship journey. Similarly, with the theme of baptism, Dr Tim Green described his initial quandary regarding its placement in the course. While he considered introducing it earlier due to its foundational role in Christian discipleship, he ultimately decided to include it later, in Lesson 14, following the order of 1 Peter. This approach allowed students to engage with other aspects of discipleship before confronting the significant step of baptism.

Dr Tim Green’s emphasis on identity formation as central to discipleship draws from his extensive experience for over four decades with MBBs across various regions. Dr Tim Green highlighted that MBB identity development evolves over time and involves complex personal and social dynamics, often complicated by stigmatization within their communities. In the diaspora, MBBs experience a ‘double liminal identity’ transitioning from Islam to Christianity while simultaneously adapting to new cultural settings. This dual experience renders the theme of pilgrimage especially relevant as these MBBs navigate belonging and spiritual transformation on multiple fronts. Dr Tim Green further emphasized the potential of MBBs to revitalize Western churches by offering fresh theological perspectives shaped by their unique journeys.

Discussion

This discussion critically examines how the theological motifs of 1 Peter intersect with the lived experiences of MBBs. In doing so, it highlights the ways Scripture shapes their identity formation, resilience, and negotiation of social and spiritual boundaries.

Identity Transformation

The teachings in 1 Peter offer profound insights into the identity, persecution, pilgrimage, and exile that MBBs experience as they transition from Islam to Christianity. These themes resonate deeply with MBBs as they grapple with a new way of understanding their relationship with God, their place in the world, and the challenges they face in their faith journey. By reflecting on the transformative power of these themes, we can see how MBBs can be strengthened in their identity in Christ and empowered to navigate the trials of persecution and displacement.

The concept of identity in 1 Peter offers profound transformation for MBBs. As former Muslims, MBBs often carry a heavy understanding of God as a distant lawgiver, demanding strict adherence to rules. 1 Peter redefines MBBs' identity, inviting them to experience God as a loving Father, accessible, and personal. This shift from a legalistic to a relational understanding of God is revolutionary, especially for those like myself (Parsa), who have struggled to reconcile the idea of God as a Father. As MBBs embrace their new identity in Christ, they begin to see themselves as beloved children, liberated from the burdens of their former legalistic views, now living under the *sharī'a* of Christ – the law of love.

Persecution and suffering are central themes in 1 Peter, where believers are described as enduring hardship for the sake of their faith. For MBBs, persecution is not a distant concept but a daily reality that deeply shapes their faith journey. Often, these believers face intense opposition, not only from government authorities but also from family and community members, who view their conversion as a betrayal. In 1 Peter, suffering is reframed as a shared experience with Christ, offering it as a means of spiritual growth and maturity. MBBs are encouraged to rejoice in their suffering, viewing it as a witness to their new identity in Christ. As they face persecution, they begin to understand that their suffering is not pointless but is part of a larger narrative in which they are being conformed more closely to the image of Christ.

For MBBs, persecution is tightly related to the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation, as the intense trials they face often arise from the rejection and betrayal of family, community, and even society at large. My (Parsa's) own experience with forgiveness illustrates this dynamic: when I first encountered the gospel, I was deeply challenged by the concept of forgiveness. Coming from a background where justice was often synonymous with retribution, forgiveness initially felt foreign and unsettling. Over time, however, I found it deeply transformative, resonating with my inner need for reconciliation and peace, and helping me release resentments in the face of aggravated persecutions. This journey of forgiveness not only reshapes an MBB's worldview but also fosters spiritual growth, helping them navigate communal and relational tensions with grace and maturity, even amidst suffering. It is through this act of forgiveness that MBBs experience the profound love and freedom found in Christ, enabling them to overcome the hurt and hostility they may encounter.

Pilgrimage and Exile

1 Peter's portrayal of Christians as pilgrims and as living in exile holds particular significance for MBBs as they transition from Islam to Christianity, often facing persecution and social exclusion. The concept of pilgrimage underscores the impermanent nature of earthly life, reminding believers that their ultimate home is in Christ, beyond any geographical or cultural ties. For MBBs, this theme of exile offers a profound way to interpret their experiences of displacement and alienation, framing their spiritual journey as one that transcends worldly belonging and finds its fulfilment in Christ.

This deeply resonates with my (Parsa's) experience. The ongoing persecution I faced in Iran from government authorities led me to see myself as living in exile in my motherland and, at times, in alienation from the Islamic community. This sense of exile was further deepened by my moving to California to pursue my studies, which amplified my feeling of displacement. Being physically removed from my homeland and experiencing emotional and spiritual alienation highlighted the realities of living as an outsider. 1 Peter's depiction of Christians as pilgrims provided a crucial framework for understanding this experience, reminding me that my true identity and home are found in Christ, not in geographical or cultural affiliations. Embracing this perspective allowed me to navigate my journey with a renewed sense of purpose, reinforcing my connection to the global Christian community and my spiritual growth as I lived out the reality of being a pilgrim in this world.

Liminality

For MBBs, conversion from Islam to Christianity involves a deeply challenging transition, not only of personal faith but also of social belonging, often marked by rejection, loss, and significant risk. This stage is 'liminal' in the sense described by British anthropologist Victor Turner⁹ based on the concept first developed by a German-born French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep.¹⁰ It is a threshold experience where old identities are shed, and new ones are yet to be fully embraced.¹¹ According to Turner, the transitions and transformations that occur in the liminal stage happen when the liminal person connects with a community of other liminal people. He calls this the '*communitas* of the *liminoid*' or the '*spontaneous communitas*.'¹²

The participants in our study embody a profound liminality, navigating transitions and transformations as pilgrims from Islam to Christ. For four of the five participants, this journey is compounded by their migration from their home country to a new place of refuge, making their liminality doubly layered. We observed that the CFM course, with its emphasis on group study, has become a form of *communitas* – a transformative community that not only connects participants to one another but also integrates them into a much larger *communitas* of Christian pilgrims. In this context, the suffering and pain of persecution, rejection, and exile serve as the backdrop for what I (Pat Brittenden) have elsewhere described as a journey from 'dehumanising liminality' to 'liberating liminality.'¹³

9 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Aldine Transaction, 2009).

10 Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

11 Patrick Brittenden, "Liberating Liminality in the Muslim-background Church of Algeria," in *Between and Between Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouch and Michael McKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 37–53.

12 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Aldine Transaction, 2009), 97.

13 Patrick Brittenden, "Liberating Liminality in the Muslim-background Church of Algeria," in *Between and Between Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouch and Michael McKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 44–48.

This experience reflects a dual nature: it encompasses the dehumanizing aspects of exclusion while simultaneously offering the potential for liberation and transformation. The MBB journey progresses from what has been for many as a dehumanized marginality to a liberating liminality, challenging dominant narratives in both traditional centres – such as the Muslim cultures in which MBBs were raised – and the Christian churches where they often struggle for acceptance. This journey represents a path of personal and communal redefinition within the *communitas* of MBBs. For the participants in our study, their journey highlights the tension between their original cultural and religious identity as Muslims and their emerging identity as Christians. Our findings suggest that this liminality is being reinterpreted as a profoundly transformative experience, enabling MBBs not only to discover a renewed identity in Christ but also to exert an influence on the broader socio-cultural environment.

We therefore observe that liminality can serve as a ‘hermeneutical key’ for understanding the identity transition among our participants and, indeed, as we have observed in other MBBs with whom we work in the context of the Hikma Partnership and Word of Life.¹⁴ As MBBs undertake discipleship through the lens of 1 Peter, they encounter theological themes of pilgrimage, exile, and belonging, which resonate with their experience of being in a liminal state between their past and present identities. This interpretation of liminality allows us to see this state not simply as an intermediate phase but as a meaningful process that holds the potential for new identity formation and self-affirmation.

The Liminal Communitas and Liberating Marginality

As we have suggested above, the concept of a spontaneous *communitas* provides an additional layer to understanding the experience of MBBs in our study. Originally developed by Victor Turner, this term refers to a community that forms in the liminal space, united by a shared experience of marginality, characterized by strong relational bonds and an encounter with the transcendent. This shared journey enables MBBs to feel a sense of solidarity and mutual support, fostering resilience amid societal rejection. For the MBBs we engaged, the CFM course became a *communitas* where they were (and are) able to connect with others undergoing similar struggles and transformations especially – though not exclusively – in the context of CFM group discussions and accountability.

The notion of *communitas* is particularly valuable for understanding how MBBs in the CFM course move from individual isolation to collective empowerment. As they meet, discuss, and pray, they are encouraged to view their experiences of persecution and rejection as part of their shared Christian journey, one that connects them not only with each other but also with the global Christian community. This connection provides a profound sense of belonging that transcends national and

14 For more information on the Hikma Partnership, see www.hikmapartnership.org and on Word of Life www.word.org.uk (both accessed 20 August 2025).

religious boundaries, offering MBBs a source of strength and support that counters the dehumanizing aspects of their liminal status.

This metaphor of liberating liminality highlights a progression from a ‘dehumanising marginality’ to ‘liberating marginality,’¹⁵ where the experience of being on the margins is no longer a source of shame or alienation but becomes a space of self-affirmation and agency. For MBBs, the CFM course has offered a pathway to navigate this transition by providing theological resources that frame their suffering and rejection as part of an authentic Christian identity visible in 1 Peter. Through that lens, MBBs learn to reinterpret their marginalization as a meaningful aspect of their discipleship, one that brings them closer to Christ and to the global body of believers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this contribution investigates the influence of the CFM discipleship course, grounded in the theology of 1 Peter, on the spiritual journeys of MBBs. The research involved five participants from Sudan, Somaliland, Pakistan, and Yemen, highlighting their lived experiences of persecution, suffering, and exile. The findings reveal that the themes in 1 Peter resonate deeply with these MBBs, providing them with a framework for understanding their struggles and the cost of discipleship. The emphasis on identity formation, persecution, pilgrimage, and exile within this biblical text plays a crucial role in helping them contextualize their faith journey amid cultural and religious challenges. Additionally, the discussion around the dual identities of MBBs illustrates the complexity of their experiences as they balance their Christian faith with their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, 1 Peter encourages a transformative understanding of God as a loving Father, allowing participants to shift from a fear-based relationship with God to a grace-filled relationship in Christ. The epistle’s teachings on forgiveness and love challenge cultural expectations, reshaping how MBBs interact with others and navigate their dual and triple identities as Christians and immigrants. Ultimately, the insights from 1 Peter, as effectively utilized in the CFM course and resonating with MBBs, equip them with the theological tools to endure suffering, embrace their faith journey, and reinforce their identity in Christ, fostering hope and resilience in the face of adversity. In practical terms, the concept of liberating liminality in the margins encourages MBBs to see their journey as one of active participation in a larger transformative movement. By embracing their marginal status, MBBs can engage more fully with their faith and with the communities around them, finding ways to contribute to the broader household of God and to the societies in which they live in ways that reflect their unique perspectives.

15 Patrick Brittenden, “Liberating Liminality in the Muslim-background Church of Algeria,” in *Between and Between Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouch and Michael McKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 44–48.

6 Through the Eyes of Christian Minorities

A Reading of 1 Peter 2

Erika van Nes-Visscher

Abstract

The church in the West has shifted towards a marginal position in a post-Christian society. In non-Western parts of the world the Christian community has long been a minority. This contribution presents empirical research conducted with focus groups consisting of Christians living in minority situations, discussing the identity and vocation of Christian communities from a minority perspective, inspired by the Biblical text of 1 Pet. 2, a text written to a Christian minority community in the early church. Discussing the theologies and practices emerging from within minority situations might be of help in moving towards a renewed paradigm as to the identity and vocation of the church in changing circumstances.

Keywords: minorities, Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), identity, vocation, 1 Pet. 2

Introduction

[A]s Western Christians, for the first time since more than a thousand years, we also find ourselves in a marginal position, outside the centre of our culture, politics and society. We live in a time that is referred to as post-Christian. For the first time since the establishment of Christian European society, European churches in the first half of the twenty-first century must reflect on what it means to be the Church without the protection of the authorities and without being part of the plausibility structure of the culture. In a context of a sometimes assertive secular humanism, European Christians find themselves again in circumstances that demonstrate more similarity to the time of the Early Church than to any other subsequent era. A new paradigm is needed for a renewed understanding of Church, mission and being a Christian.¹

1 Willem van der Deijl, *Suffering with Christ: A Theology of Persecution for the Church Today* (Amersfoort: Uitgeverij Plateau & Open Doors, 2024), 17.

After more than a millennium, the Western church has shifted from being part of a context which has been viewed for many centuries as ‘Christian’ to being a minority in a post-Christian society. This changed situation raises questions for the church with regard to theological as well as ecclesiological matters: what is the identity of the church and what is the church’s vocation in a changing context? In many parts of the world the Christian community has lived as a religious minority² for centuries. Theological and ecclesiological reflections on being a Christian community that is a minority are not new to them. As Miroslav Volf says, ‘gospel’ always involves a way of living as a Christian community in a particular cultural context,³ and in this contribution, I present an inquiry into the understanding of Christians who live as a minority – among whom are converts – concerning the identity and vocation of the church.

Empirical Research

In line with the overall research of this publication, and in search of a redefining of identity and vocation in a changing context, I began empirical research, by means of focus groups, on Christian minority communities reading and discussing a part of the biblical text that is central to this volume: the first letter of Peter.⁴ I wanted to involve those so termed ‘ordinary readers’⁵ who live as a Christian minority within society in order:

to explore the space in which the effect of *reading the text now* becomes manifest, the space where the text becomes embedded in a new context, where, for better or for worse, processes of appropriation take place and readers try to understand the text as a letter directly addressed to themselves and their situation.⁶

Ordinary readers – or following Yousef AlKhouri – non-specialized⁷ readers ‘treat the texts with closeness and nearness,’ in order to find out how the Bible can ‘aid

2 Seeking to do justice to the complexity of the word ‘minority,’ I refer to the introductory Chapter 1 of this current volume by Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, “The Church as Minority in the Context of Islam.”

3 Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter,” *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 15–30 (16).

4 For feasibility in the focus groups, I had to select a specific part of the text of 1 Peter to be studied. The second chapter discusses both identity and vocation – the main points of this research – so the reading of this chapter seemed to serve the purpose for this specific contribution.

5 The concept of ‘ordinary readers’ is broadly discussed. I follow the description by Hans de Wit, who means by ‘ordinary reader’ a preference ‘to understand both a *space* and a *way of reading*, an *attitude toward the text*. The space is where the *effect* of the process of reading biblical texts is revealed, where Bible reading becomes decisive and ethical. ... By “attitude,” we understand the way readers approach biblical texts.’ In Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, eds., *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 3–4.

6 Hans de Wit and Janet Dyk, eds., *Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 3.

7 Yousef K.Y. AlKhouri, “The Kingdom of God and Empires: A Contemporary Palestinian Christian Contextual Biblical Interpretation” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 42.

readers to make sense of their lives and circumstances.⁸ In so doing, they ‘supply and challenge scholarship with questions arising from their life experience, which might be hidden to scholars. Hence, ordinary readers are part of and partners with scholars in the process of reading and interpreting the biblical texts.’⁹ In this volume, therefore, it seemed important to insert these voices next to scholarly voices on the text of 1 Peter. The participants were asked to first focus on their cultural context and personal experiences with regard to the topics of identity, vocation, and living as a Christian minority in order to ‘deliberately ... encourage a contextual and cultural engagement with the biblical text that will follow,’¹⁰ in this particular case the biblical text of 1 Pet. 2.

A presupposition of this research is the conviction that reading the Holy Scriptures is not just a textual affair that can be interpreted with hermeneutics and exegetical methods, but that it is existential to communities and individuals. It is not only that theology is shaping the way of living of Christian minority communities, but also the other way around: the act of living as a Christian minority community is shaping the theology existentially.¹¹ The meaning of culture and circumstances are fundamental in people’s mental programming¹² and, correspondingly, to the way they read and interpret sacred Scriptures. While the previous contributions to this publication focus on 1 Peter from the perspective of hermeneutics or social identity, this specific contribution adds another voice from an existential point of view. This broadens the research, adding another perspective on the same biblical text and the way the text influences Christian (minority) communities.

The conversations are focused on identity and the vocation of the Christian community, seen from a minority perspective. I chose the lens of MBBs,¹³ as alongside that of believers with a Christian background, CBBs,¹⁴ living in minority situa-

8 Yousef K.Y. AlKhouri, “The Kingdom of God and Empires: A Contemporary Palestinian Christian Contextual Biblical Interpretation” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 43.

9 Yousef K.Y. AlKhouri, “The Kingdom of God and Empires: A Contemporary Palestinian Christian Contextual Biblical Interpretation” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 43.

10 Helen John, *Biblical Interpretation and African Traditional Religion*, Biblical Interpretation 176, ed. Paul Anderson and Jennifer L. Koosed (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 32.

11 Angie Pears describes ‘contextual theology’ as Christian theology which is explicitly shaped, if not driven, by the recognition of the contextual nature of theology, which is different from the claim that all theology is contextual. See: Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

12 Hans de Wit cited in Gerald West, “Locating ‘Contextual Bible Study’ and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics,” in *New perspectives on Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Daniel S. Chipani, Martien Brinkman, and Hans Snoek (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2015), 107–135 (111).

13 Followers of Jesus from an Islamic background are named differently. For coherence throughout this publication, we use the abbreviation MBBs: Muslim Background Believers.

14 In correspondence with the terminology of ‘MBB,’ we use the term ‘CBB’ to describe followers of Jesus who grew up as Christians, Christian Background Believers. Although not uncritically adopted, we use this term to make a distinction between followers of Jesus who have grown up in Christian families and those who converted from other backgrounds – in this case especially from Islam.

tions. CBBs in minority situations have to deal with questions regarding identity and vocation, and this applies probably even more to MBBs as they form a double minority: a minority within the Christian minority.¹⁵ This choice of participants was made with the hope of ‘bring[ing] the inculturation of biblical stories within one culture into relationship with their inculturation in another context, not for the sake of inculturation itself, but to make it serve the quest for truth, justice, and life.’¹⁶

The research consisted of ten focus groups that met between summer 2023 and summer 2024.¹⁷ The participants of these focus groups live as religious minorities in a multireligious context.¹⁸ Some of the groups consisted of MBBs, others of CBBs, or a mix of both. There was one exception of a focus group consisting of Messianic believers with a Jewish background, JBBs.¹⁹

This is a qualitative research,²⁰ attending to the voices of specific Christian minorities²¹ in order to understand the meaning they ascribe to biblical texts to

15 Believers of an Islamic background are not distinguishable from other churches per se. They are part of different kinds of churches or stay within Islam. The reason why I consider it important to make the distinction between MBBs and CBBs will follow in this contribution.

16 Hans de Wit cited in Gerald West, “Locating ‘Contextual Bible Study’ and Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics within Biblical Liberation Hermeneutics,” in *New perspectives on Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Daniel S. Schipani, Martien Brinkman, and Hans Snoek (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2015), 111.

17 Each focus group was led by a moderator who received an instruction manual with background information, practical tools, as well as questions for discussion. The focus groups lasted about 2 hours. There was a maximum of 8 participants per group so everyone was able to participate actively. The conversations of the focus groups are recorded and have been reported as video or audio files, as verbatim (in English or Dutch), as translations (from Arabic), or summarized in detail. For reasons of privacy and safety, the participants and countries will not be specified by name. Instead, I will refer to the groups and persons by using codes.

18 This research is part of The Church in the Context of Islam Foundation; see www.church-islam.nl (accessed September 2024). This foundation is located in the Netherlands and its partners are mainly related to the MENA region. All focus groups were created within the network of, or in cooperation with, partners of the foundation. Therefore, the focus groups are mainly (but not only) related to the Western-European context and the MENA region.

19 In correspondence with the notation of the other groups, we will refer to followers of Jesus with a Jewish Background as JBBs. Of course, just one such group does not give any data on which we can build theories. We use this data, however, as a mirror experience, to get a qualitative feeling from a very specific group as to how they search for and live with regard to their identity and vocation as JBBs in order to investigate how the journey of these specific participants towards and with Christ is similar and specific compared to other minority groups.

20 For qualitative research in intercultural Bible reading, see, e.g., Hans de Wit, “Through the Eyes of Another,” in *Through the Eyes of Another; Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. Hans de Wit, Louis Jonker, Marleen Kool, and Daniel Schipani (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 42–43.

21 It is, therefore, not meant to be a representation of ‘the’ Christian minorities or their theologies; on the contrary, it is meant as a mirror that shows what happens when some Christians who live as a minority read biblical texts concerning the identity and vocation of the church and how this is related to their daily life situations. It sheds some light on the question of what processes of

make sense of their lives and circumstances.²² The open research design provides opportunities for inductive research,²³ carefully listening to the ordinary readers discussing identity and vocation. To interpret the results, I dwelt in and reflected on the research findings to become grounded in the material and to identify analytical categories.²⁴ Based on the analysis of the data, the aim of what follows is to give the reader a feeling of what happened during the discussions, with the intention to broaden the theological reflection with regard to both identity and vocation as related to 1 Peter.

Analysis and Theological Reflections on Identity

‘Identity’ is a much-debated term in the construction of which many aspects play a role. In this contribution I use the definition set out by Rachel Reedijk because this definition gives account of individual self-development as well as communal aspects and is useful in research on multireligious dynamics: ‘Identity consists of the individual and collective self-aspects the individual ascribes to himself, as well as the objective identity which is defined at the level of communities and congregations.’²⁵ It is important to note that individuals or groups do not have a singular identity. Instead, people have multiple identities that are structured in some way.²⁶ ‘Understanding the structure of multiple social identities is important because representations of one’s ingroups have effects not only on the self-concept but also on the nature of relationships between self and others.’²⁷ Within the scope of this contribution I highlight two aspects related to identity: the distinction between different Christian identities, as well as theological notions about being a minority.

Converts versus CBBs

With regard to identity, what emerged from the data was the importance of distinguishing between different Christian groups due to the different contextual

appropriation take place and how this affects the dogma about and/or praxis of living as a religious minority community.

22 Yousef K.Y. AlKhouri, “The Kingdom of God and Empires: A Contemporary Palestinian Christian Contextual Biblical Interpretation” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 43.

23 Hans de Wit, Marleen Kool, Nel van der Harst, and Arie Moolenaar, eds., *Putten uit de Bron: Een bijbelverhaal intercultureel gelezen* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 113.

24 Corresponding to the grounded-theory approach, the steps of which are summarized by H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th ed. (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 492.

25 Rachel Reedijk, “Roots and Routes: Identity Construction and the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2010), 21.

26 See Jack Barentsen, “Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023), 59–73. See also Chapter 4 of the current volume by Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, “Being a Christian Minority and Creating a Soft Difference.”

27 Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, “Social Identity Complexity,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6.2 (2002): 88–106 (88).

experiences of ‘Christians.’²⁸ In some of the so-called ‘MENA societies’ (Middle Eastern and North African societies) where Christians are a minority, these Christian minorities have existed for centuries and predate the Islamic presence, such as the Coptic or Orthodox churches. They have a long history within their societal context and there is a long history of interaction between Christianity and Islam. In the eras after Islam became the ruling power in this region, the relationship with religious minorities (Christianity among them) developed over time and across areas. Jewish and Christian minorities had their own position.²⁹ This is different for those who converted out of the majority religion (in this case, Islam) to another religion (in this case, Christianity). The possibility of openly identifying as ‘Christian’ or ‘follower of Jesus’ and whether or not they are accepted as such, socially as well as juridically, is a difference between CBBs and MBBs living in societies where Muslims are the major religious group. The established churches have a long history of being present in the country and are accepted within society and the juridical system. As a CBB said, we are a ‘minority, but with strong roots.’³⁰ And although these Christians experience that society is organized by the majority religion³¹ (in this case Islam, regarding, e.g., times of fasting, prayer, and religious days), the established churches are able to identify as Christian and claim rights in accordance with the juridical system: ‘I can neglect my own right, I mean something that will affect me only, no problem, but the church’s rights cannot be neglected.’³²

Openly identifying as a follower of Jesus and living accordingly is, however, a different experience for MBBs. Although the situations differ from country to country, it was not uncommon to hear stories like ‘I’m not revealing that I have converted,’³³ or ‘I’m not able to go to the church because of my situation as a Muslim background believer.’³⁴ For converts it is sometimes impossible to make their religious identity known: ‘I cannot show my identity. I cannot even express my identity through my voice.’³⁵ Not infrequently they reveal the experience of

28 ‘Christian’ between quotation marks, as the self-identification of MBBs is not always in line with what is commonly understood to be encompassed in the designation ‘Christian,’ see for example the model of J. Travis, the C1–C6 spectrum, where people in the C4 or C5 window identify themselves as ‘Followers of Jesus,’ ‘Muslim followers of Isa al-Masih,’ or the like. John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-centered Communities’ (‘C’) Found in the Muslim Context,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 34.4 (October 1998): 407–408.

29 The history of Christianity in these areas, and the interaction with Islam, spans centuries in which different developments took place. For an overview, see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), especially Chapter 4: “The Great Tribulation,” 97–138.

30 Focus group 7-2C2, 10.

31 Focus group 7-1C2, 3.

32 Focus group 3C1, 8.

33 Focus group 4C6, 2.

34 Focus group 4C3, 3.

35 Focus group 4CM1, 7.

being a double minority: within society, as well as within the church. On the part of society or family, their conversion is looked at with suspicion.

They [my parents] felt they were under the impression or understanding that we became Christians because we'd become Westernized. So, there is this connection between being Christian and being a Western. ... It had nothing to do with me wanting to become ... Westernized at all. But this was a mind-set that was entrenched in their minds ... So Muslim background believers do experience this sort of identity crisis.³⁶

On the part of the church, converts are looked at with suspicion as well: 'When a MBB comes to the church everyone would think that he is working with the government. ... Like a spy. ... Nobody trusts him. Nobody. So, he's not being trusted and feels excluded.'³⁷ 'Those who are members of the church, sometimes they see them suspiciously, because they suspect: "Who are these people? Maybe they are terrorists while they are coming to our church." ... So sometimes they find themselves ... under pressure from the Christians themselves.'³⁸

This experience of estrangement from society as well as from the church is not specifically related to converts from Islam, as converts from another religious background (in this case JBBs) have similar experiences: 'Sometimes we stand on one side of the bridge, sometimes on the other side, sometimes we are pushed onto the bridge. We belong neither to one side nor to the other. Only when it is opportune, are we allowed to belong to one group or the other.'³⁹ Or, 'I belong neither completely to the Christians nor completely to the Jews. That is why I do not feel completely at home with either of these.'⁴⁰ This feeling of belonging, and not belonging, is recognized by MBBs and JBBs in the focus groups.

For me this feeling of being a bit isolated, I especially feel it during holidays. Sometimes I feel quite saddened by it. For example when it's Easter or Christmas, I realise that I can't celebrate it with my biological family. But I also don't have someone to share this with. So yes, you feel like a minority because you are just celebrating with yourself. Sometimes that's good because it's just between you and God. At other times you also miss community and people.⁴¹

The estrangement from their former religious ingroup becomes especially tangible during personally impactful moments. 'Births, deaths, marriages; these are the big opportunities. They are such important parts of society. You feel the exclusion and the pain of what it means in that situation when ... people don't participate, its

36 Focus group 8C4, 5.

37 Focus group 5-1C3, 54.

38 Focus group 5-1C4, 56.

39 Focus group 6C1, 2.

40 Focus group 6C2, 2.

41 Focus group 9C4, 2.

kind of shameful as well.⁴² Sometimes, due to their hidden conversion, MBBs need to pretend they are still part of their former religious ingroup and act accordingly in order to be able to participate in important life events.

The relationship between a religious individual or community and society is different when you cannot openly identify as part of a religious community. Jack Barentsen describes a social identity as ‘a “sense of us,” which is informed by similarities and differences with other group members as compared to outsiders.’⁴³ For converts – openly or hidden – this ‘sense of us’ is much more difficult to experience. Before conversion, converts shared some of their ingroup identities with other citizens of the country (national identity), with their family (family identity), and with their former religious community which was the religion of the majority (religious identity). Sonia Roccas and Marilynn Brewer name four forms of identity structure that show different ways of representing the multiple ingroups one belongs to: intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger.⁴⁴ This specification of identity structures can be of help to understand that converts structure their multiple identities differently than believers who have grown up in their faith, because after conversion, some of these ingroup identities remain shared identities, while religious identity has changed. This can force converts to compartmentalize their identities. ‘In my life now I live two lives. One at work, where I can’t show anything about my religion and my acts. ... Another life is with my friends and with my community where I show myself as a Christian and as Christlike.’⁴⁵ For the people around these converts, the new religious identity (if it is openly known) is sometimes viewed as non-convergent and mutually exclusive with the other identities: for example with being a good son/daughter (family identity), employee (identity at work), believer (belonging to a religious community), or citizen (national identity). In this case, the different social identities are not compartmentalized on the part of the bystanders, but are viewed from the scheme of dominance, in which the religious identity is dominant and other social identities are subordinated or at least influenced by the religious identity.⁴⁶

When people stay in the same context after conversion, it is a challenge for them to deal with the impact of their changed religious identity on the other social identities.

42 Focus group 5-ICM, 43–44.

43 Jack Barentsen, “Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023), 61.

44 Sonia Roccas and Marilynn B. Brewer, “Social Identity Complexity,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 6.2 (2002): 89–91. See also Chapter 4 of this current volume, “Being a Christian Minority and Creating a Soft Difference,” by Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, who describe the differentiation in the ways of interrelationship between social identities in more detail.

45 Focus group 9C1, 3.

46 Due to the affective and evaluative dimensions of social identity theories, see Jack Barentsen, “Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective,” in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: AUP, 2023), 62.

The concept of a [local] Christian was totally alien to [someone I met]. ... Other people, they look at me and they automatically make assumptions about my identity, and who I am. And the challenge I then face is I've got to work through all that noise to finally get to the point of accepting me. ... Yes, I may be [a national citizen], but I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. ... Within the context of the community I came out of, it's like, they still can't get their head around. Why would you leave us?⁴⁷

This is different for CBBs whose religious identity did not change and did not disturb social identities. Their shared ingroup identities stay the same, which creates a safer environment for expressing their religious identity. Following the evaluative aspect of Social Identity Theory (SIT), 'the ingroup reflects on the outgroup and determines the boundaries.'⁴⁸ This has to do with belonging and distinctiveness, but also with security; which seemed especially important in the situation of MBBs who were mistrusted by established Christian communities, where the questions arise as to whom to trust, or not, and how to then deal with the resulting (societal) disturbance when converts join another religious ingroup. The multifaceted identities of MBBs are differently related than the social identities of CBBs, with the attendant challenges of that. Therefore, when it comes to questions related to identity, it is of importance to distinguish between different Christian identities to do justice to each specific situation.

The Church as Minority

In this research, the commonality between MBBs and CBBs is that all of them live as religious minorities within their societal contexts.⁴⁹ Interestingly, although some said 'being ... a minority in the community, it doesn't mean that you are somehow weak,'⁵⁰ most of the focus groups viewed the term 'minority' as negative:⁵¹ 'Thinking about the word minority [speaking about our own countries], it means that a group is being ruled over and oppressed by others,'⁵² and, 'the feeling of minority should be reduced.'⁵³ A focus group in the MENA region compares their

47 Focus group 8C2, 4.

48 Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, "The Dynamics of Exclusion and Inclusion in 1 Peter," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive? A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 115–129 (118).

49 Being a minority within a societal context involves a certain degree of complexity. All of the participants in this research are living as a Christian minority within their society. However, although they are a minority on the national level (numerical or on other levels as well), sometimes they live in situations of being a majority in relation to their very specific local context (e.g., within their hometown or regional area, Christians may make up a majority of the population).

50 Focus group 7-2C1, 2.

51 The moderators of the focus groups received a manual beforehand. In this manual, no specific definition of 'minority' was given; I wanted the groups to explore their own ideas about it.

52 Focus group 10C4, 11.

53 Focus group 1CM, 5.

situation to the European situation and they express the idea of being a majority as being safe: 'The majority there [in Europe] are Christians, so they do not have to fear.'⁵⁴ However, a focus group of CBBs in a European situation experiences this differently: 'In a sense, we are a threatened minority, but not so much because of pressure from outside but because of decline from within and because of lack of growth from outside.'⁵⁵ A pastor describes his experience thus:

In the past people ... used to stand in line to come to church. Nowadays, people have to get used to the fact that they are no longer the church as it used to be. There is still a lot of pain there ... That old image is still very strong. ... I actually feel a bit like a grief counsellor. Because ... people still have all kinds of ideas about how it used to be, but that is getting less. ... We can't hold on to everything from the past, and that is the grieving process.⁵⁶

Christians who live as a minority in the MENA region as well as in the West emphasize the importance of equipping followers of Jesus in being a minority. In the Western part of the world, this could be guiding people in a paradigm shift from being a majority to the reality of being a minority.

I think that what I get from 1 Peter 2, is that it is not wrong to emphasize to the members of our community ... that we are foreigners and that we are therefore a minority and that you really have to deal with this situation instead of thinking 'this will just continue.' ... People should actually be trained, guided and equipped in this.⁵⁷

In other words, 'recognizing that you are a minority instead of still having unspoken dreams of full churches.'⁵⁸ In the MENA region, this paradigm shift is not on the agenda, as the Christian community has long been a minority. In a focus group in this region it is emphasized that a task of the Christian community as a minority is 'preparing the people who are bullied.'⁵⁹ And, inspired by the letter of Peter, 'You have to build this mindset in the next generations that it is okay to be different, because Jesus was different, and you will arm yourselves with this attitude.'⁶⁰ The biblical text of 1 Peter is interpreted as having something to say to converts who experience minority situations, as an MBB shares: 'I think ... this whole chapter was written for Muslim background believers. That's what I thought. Like from verse one to [the] end.'⁶¹ Inspired by the letter of Peter, an MBB living in the Western context expresses,

54 Focus group 3C1, 11.

55 Focus group 2-1C1, 3.

56 Focus group 2-2C3, 11, 34, 36.

57 Focus group 2-2C1, 92-3.

58 Focus group 2-2C4, 93.

59 Focus group 7-1C3, 7.

60 Focus group 7-2C2, 10.

61 Focus group 8C3, 10.

‘Foreigners and exiles will always be the minority in any country. Because as soon as you are no longer a foreigner [and] you are no longer an exile, you are in the majority. ... I think Peter is reminding us that the church is always, in a sense, to see itself in the context of a minority. ... We are always called to be living as aliens and foreigners because we know we are not of this world but we are waiting for the world to come. And I think that mindset is important. And as soon as we realize ... that we are the minority, how we behave changes. Because I think if the challenge is ‘We need to become the majority again,’ we are missing the point. ... We are not called to be the majority.’⁶²

An interesting observation is that although being a minority is experienced mainly as something negative, at the same time there is this conviction – supported by the reading of the letter of Peter – of being aliens and exiles as a characteristic of Christians, and the wish to equip the church in that. In the search for a renewed understanding of the identity of the church, this understanding of the church as a minority might be helpful. When ‘identity’ is defined as the individual and collective self-aspects, as well as the objective identity defined at the level of communities,⁶³ 1 Pet. 2 offers Christians who live as a minority the linguistic tools of group-identity vocabulary⁶⁴ by describing the Petrine community as ‘aliens’ and ‘exiles,’ which presumes them to be different from the majority, seeing minority as a characteristic of the community of Christ-followers.⁶⁵

Analysis and Theological Reflections on Vocation

As we turn now to the second subject of our research, the vocation of the church, two main themes emerged from the data of the focus groups: the themes of suffering and persecution, as well as the relation of the community of believers to the societal environment.

Religious Suffering

For the community of believers who are following Jesus in the non-Western regions and for MBBs, suffering for the sake of Christ seems to be a given. Suffering,

62 Focus group 8C2, 19.

63 Rachel Reedijk, “Roots and Routes: Identity Construction and the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue” (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2010), 21.

64 See also Chapter 2 of this current volume by Kar Yong Lim, “Reading 1 Peter in Constructing Minority Identity,” especially when he describes the echo of the influence of the LXX on the author’s language in the first letter of Peter, relating the description of the Petrine community to the historical community of the Old Testament, which makes the terminology used more than just a description of the specific and historical Petrine community.

65 Which is essentially different from the Islamic *Fiqh al-aqalliyāt*, the Muslim jurisprudence of minorities. Instead of describing a way of living as a minority, or seeking some kind of minority theology, in the Petrine epistles, the alienation is presented as an *ontological* feature of God’s people.

according to them, is not just something that *happens* to the followers of Jesus; in many focus groups it was perceived as a theological existential feature of the church. Identity-bound suffering is the normal pattern; suffering is part of the nature of the Christian community of believers. This is seen as deriving from the Holy Scriptures:

The beautiful thing is that God in Christianity did not deceive us. He did not give us the intention that we will belong to strong and powerful groups here on earth, or that we will belong to a fast-growing commune. ... The Bible is very clear that there will be killing and persecution.⁶⁶

Or, related to the words of Jesus, 'Jesus didn't promise us an easy life if we decide to follow Him. That is why Jesus said "Take up your cross and follow Me." Life in general is not easy and it is even more difficult when we believe in Jesus.'⁶⁷ Suffering for the sake of Jesus is seen as an indispensable part of following Jesus, because he went before on the road of suffering: 'There are many verses in the Bible that tell us to ... have the mind of Christ, and share with His sufferings. So it is a very natural consequence that what happened to Christ should also happen to His followers. It is the trademark of the true Christian.'⁶⁸

A suffering community seems to be a description of the community of believers in Jesus in terms of their identity; however, it also seems to be an integral part with regard to their vocation.

Suffering to some extent is inevitable. Jesus suffered and He left us an example to follow that. So suffering shouldn't be an obstacle for following God and for doing what God has called us to do. But we are to endure and we are to maintain a closer relationship with the Lord the same time.⁶⁹

In other words, 'The consequences of our faith could lead to our death. The Christian faith comes as a package. If you haven't been persecuted even a bit, you should question your faith.'⁷⁰

Inspired by the Bad Urach Statement,⁷¹ I suggest that it is helpful to distinguish between suffering and persecution. Religious suffering can be defined as 'suffering that a person would not encounter if he or she were not identified with' a specific religion.⁷² Whereas religious persecution can be described as 'an unjust

66 Focus group 10C2, 2.

67 Focus group 10C4, 5.

68 Focus group 10C2, 14.

69 Focus group 5-1C3, 88–89.

70 Focus group 10C2, 9.

71 This statement is the result of a theological consultation in Bad Urach, Germany (2009), towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom for the global church in mission; see Christof Sauer, ed., *Bad Urach Statement*, The WEA Global Issues Series 9 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017).

72 Based on the Bad Urach Statement, but applied to all religions. Christof Sauer, ed., *Bad Urach Statement*, The WEA Global Issues Series 9 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017), 27.

action directed against a believer or group of believers of a certain religion or worldview. ... [I]t has religion ... as its primary motivation, though other factors can be involved.’⁷³ In terms of time, the Bad Urach Statement states that ‘persecution can be represented as waves on a sea of suffering as the constant.’⁷⁴ I see this as a helpful distinction. Churches in the West are not used to religious suffering: apart from some personal experiences in the private sphere, most Christians in the West never experience the type of suffering that is only avoided by not being identified as Christians. Resulting from that, they are not expecting persecution, let alone martyrdom.⁷⁵ This is opposite to the community of believers in other parts of the world, and especially to converts (in this case MBBs): suffering is a fundamental constant in their identity as followers of Christ, and persecution, and sometimes even martyrdom, as a specific result of that constant. Suffering, in their opinion, is the normal pattern when you follow Jesus. ‘Suffering for Christ ... is the practice that we live every day from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep.’⁷⁶

For the church in the West that has shifted towards a marginal position in a post-Christian society, a renewed paradigm on the changing circumstances might involve a renewed vision of suffering. Suffering is not only something you experience but is an integral part of the life of the community of Jesus followers. ‘From 1 Peter 2, I learn that as a faith community, we must regard suffering as inherent to our Christian faith.’⁷⁷ ‘That is the nature of the church. A church that suffers.’⁷⁸ The Western church might develop a renewed paradigm of suffering as a constant and persecution as a possible consequence, and equip the community of believers in light of this perspective. The first letter of Peter can contribute to this process, as Peter ‘is changing the mindset of suffering’⁷⁹ when he presents suffering as an integral part of the life of the community of Jesus-followers, entrenched in a theological belief.⁸⁰ According to MBBs, part of the paradigm could be the conviction that

73 Christof Sauer, ed., *Bad Urach Statement*, The WEA Global Issues Series 9 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017), 28.

74 Christof Sauer, ed., *Bad Urach Statement*, The WEA Global Issues Series 9 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017), 27.

75 The Bad Urach Statement uses the idea of concentric circles: suffering as the widest circle, persecution a smaller one within it, and martyrdom as the innermost circle (Christof Sauer, ed., *Bad Urach Statement*, The WEA Global Issues Series 9 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2017), 27). Martyrdom is defined as ‘voluntary, but not intentionally (through unnecessary provocation), losing one’s life to those hostile to the faith in proclamation or defence of Christian belief, for abstaining from actions that would constitute a denial of the faith, or in execution of a special prophetic commission by God.’ Sauer, *Bad Urach Statement*, 29. While martyrdom is not within the scope of this contribution, I do not include any discussion on that out here.

76 Focus group 4CM2, 7.

77 Focus group 6C2, 7-8.

78 Focus group 4CM3, 13.

79 Focus group 7-2C1, 3.

80 See Chapter 3 of this current volume, “Suffering as an Integral Part of Mission in 1 Peter,” by Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, who elaborates on 1 Peter presenting suffering as an integral part of mission, rooted in a firm theological conviction.

‘signing up to be a follower of Christ isn’t a bed of roses.’⁸¹ Paradoxically, I think this honest testimony might probably just welcome people into the community of Christ-followers and help them persevere.

Relation to Societal Environment

Following the analyses seeing minority as a characteristic of the identity of the community of Christ-followers, and a need for a renewed paradigm on suffering and persecution, the last theme to mention in this contribution is the relation to the societal environment.

A participant of a focus group of CBBs in a Western context shared a personal story in which someone told him, ‘I don’t know if I still want to raise my child in the faith, because then I already know that I am excluding them from the group.’⁸² The notion of exclusion was raised more often by CBBs from the Western region: ‘I often notice the ... tendency: we would rather not be too “different,” we like to say that we are “all people” and we are “no different from others.” ... Being distinctive is not really desired, not even by church members.’⁸³ Awareness of this tendency also emerged in focus groups of CBBs in the non-Western context:

St. Peter chapter 4 ... he says, ‘... Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude.’ ... It is okay to be different and it is okay to suffer. ... Actually, this is your calling, to be different. ... So you have to build this mindset in the next generations, that it’s okay to be different because Jesus was different, and you will arm yourselves with this attitude.⁸⁴

Similarly, another participant commented, ‘I think part of the suffering is that you are ready for the suffering, ... ready to be different. ... You are ready for it, you’re courageous enough to bear this.’⁸⁵ And MBBs, a minority within a minority, state, ‘We need to work out our spiritual muscles so we can be able to bear persecution. And this is what we need to do on a personal level and on the church level as well, so we can live the life of Christ.’⁸⁶

With regard to the vocation of the church, and suffering and/or persecution as part of that, the participants of the focus groups mention the importance – as Peter does in his letter – of raising awareness of being a minority in the first place, and secondly of exploring what it means to live accordingly. This can imply the acceptance of a marginalized position:

81 Focus group 8C2, 13.

82 Focus group 2-2C3, 33.

83 Focus group 2-1C1, 4.

84 Focus group 7-2C3, 10.

85 Focus group 7-1C2, 11.

86 Focus group 4C5, 15.

The fact that if you raise children as Christians in this context, you are also putting them in a certain outside position. But that is also exactly the essence of being a minority. ... That indeed the majority of the people around you do things differently and are occupied differently.⁸⁷

The scriptural metaphor of being aliens and exiles, as conveyed by 1 Peter, can be a powerful image for the community of believers in following their Lord Jesus Christ, in confirming their identity and empowering their vocation to embrace a certain difference with regard to the societal environment. As Volf says, 'To make a difference, one must be different.'⁸⁸ This does not erase the vulnerability or struggles in living as a minority. As an MBB commented after participating in a focus group, 'Being a minority is a very painful experience, yet it is also very transformative.'⁸⁹ Being a minority might sometimes feel vulnerable. I see it as a hopeful and God-given grace that '[v]ocation does not erase vulnerability but rather affirms it as the human context in which one's vocation is recognized.'⁹⁰

Conclusion

The church in the West has shifted towards a marginal position in a post-Christian society, a position that is rather new to them. Being a minority community, however, is nothing new to the worldwide church. Exploring questions and biblical texts regarding the identity and vocation of the Christian community as a minority might be a worthwhile investment for the Christian community – be it CBBs or believers with a conversion background. Inspired by 1 Pet. 2, the biblical text hands us a theological vocabulary that can be of help in our search for a renewed understanding of the identity and vocation of the Christian community in a marginal position. It offers linguistic expressions that describe the reality of belonging to a minority religious community and also affirm the lived reality of the community of Jesus-followers for whom suffering is a constant. I hope the church in the West takes up the twofold challenge to let its theology shape the lived experience of being a minority, and vice versa, to let the act of living as a minority shape its theology existentially. This can help the church in the West to describe and embrace its own changing position, and bring a renewed understanding of church, mission, and being Christian; not only in relation to the personal lives of believers right now, but also as a paradigm under investigation for the generations to come.

87 Focus group 2-2CM, 95.

88 Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 24 (16).

89 Focus group 5CM2.

90 Eleonora D. Hof, "Reimagining Mission in the Postcolonial Condition: A Theology of Vulnerability and Vocation at the Margins" (PhD diss., Protestantse Theologische Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2016), 303.

Part II

Diverse Monotheistic Perspectives on Being a Religious Minority



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7 Two Jewish Minorities in the Diaspora

The Targum and Yefet ben Eli on Song of Songs

Eveline van Staaldvine-Sulman

Abstract

A paraphrastic translation of Song of Songs (the Rabbanite Targum) and a commentary on that biblical book by the Karaite Yefet ben Eli both betray the authors' views on the diaspora, especially regarding their group's position as a minority in a sometimes hostile environment. While there are many similarities in the way these books explain and apply the Hebrew text to their readers, one difference stands out and affects the way the two minorities, Rabbanite and Karaite Jews, react to their exilic circumstances: the Rabbanites do not have any theological arguments or sociological inclination to lift the exile themselves and actively strive for a majority society somewhere, while the Karaite Yefet ben Eli offers both.

Keywords: Targum, Song of Songs, Rabbanite Judaism, Karaism, Mourners for Zion, messianism

Introduction

In the tenth century, all Jews lived as a minority under Christian, Muslim, or other authorities. In areas where Christians made up the majority, Jews were seen as representatives of the old covenant and as descendants of those who had crucified Jesus. In Islamic areas, they fell under the category of 'people of the book' and were regarded more highly than Christians because of their strict monotheism.¹ Both Christians – once the majority in number in the Middle East, but rapidly declining in the tenth century² – and Jews were considered dhimmis, a protected minority in Islam, but in different ways and under interpretations vulnerable to minoritization and discrimination.³ Both groups were distinguishable by their

1 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

2 Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman, 1986), 202.

3 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 73.

clothing and their names. Both groups had gradually adopted the Arabic language of those in power, the Christians earlier than the Jews. The Jews, however, generally wrote their Arabic in Hebrew letters (Judeo-Arabic), probably because they learned to write and read Hebrew and Aramaic first.⁴ Jews, therefore, were in every respect a minority: (1) numerically; (2) politically, because they were excluded from government service⁵ and did not have a homeland or majority land to withdraw to; (3) ethnically; (4) religiously; (5) socially, because of the dhimmi status in the Islamic and the negative status in the Christian world; and (6) linguistically in their writing.⁶

Two Minorities

The majority of Judaism had gradually become Rabbanite, that is, they followed the explanations and applications of the Torah as recorded in the rabbinic writings of the Mishnah and the Talmud.⁷ After the advent of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 CE and the construction of Baghdad as its capital in 762 CE, the Jewish academies of present-day Iraq became the centre of Rabbanite Judaism.⁸ Their leaders became known by the title *gaon*, 'splendour,' and were 'considered the chief expositors of the Jewish religious tradition and the highest authorities in matters of religious law and practice.'⁹ One of the most influential writers of these *geonim* was Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon, born in 882 CE in Pithom, Upper Egypt.¹⁰ Within biblical studies, Saadiah is famous for his Arabic translation of the Bible and his Arabic commentary on it.¹¹ He defended the rabbinic Jewish religion against Christians, Muslims, and Zoroastrians by using the basic assumptions of the Mutazilite school in Islam. 'These Islamic scholars maintained that rational argument was vital in matters of

4 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 94.

5 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 74.

6 In the next description and discussion, the minority status only concerns the two Jewish groups. Neither source text gives any indication of how to be a minority as an individual.

7 I use the word 'rabbinic' when referring to rabbinic literature and the word 'rabbanite' when referring to that part of Judaism that adheres to this literature. There are several theories about how united or divided Judaism was in the first millennium, see José Costa, 'Some Remarks About Non-Rabbinic Judaism, Rabbinization, and Synagogal Judaism,' in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67–118.

8 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 77.

9 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 77.

10 Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 114.

11 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 81.

religious belief and that Greek philosophy could serve as the handmaiden of religious faith.¹²

Within Judaism itself, Saadiyah fought against the Karaites, a Jewish minority,¹³ who did not accept the Mishnah and the Talmud as authoritative. They were a mix of various sectarian groups, rejecting the authority of the Rabbanite leaders in the diaspora and intent on only studying the biblical texts.¹⁴ Influences of the Islamic Mutazilite school are also visible among them.¹⁵ A minority within the Karaites were the ‘Mourners of/for Zion.’¹⁶ They lived in Jerusalem following a life of mourning, reciting lamentations, asceticism, strict abstinence from meat and wine, and biblical studies, hoping to persuade God to send the messiah.¹⁷ The Mourners were able to live in Jerusalem because the Islamic conquerors of Jerusalem in 638 CE had ‘revoked the prohibition that had officially been in effect since the time of Hadrian against Jews inhabiting the city.’¹⁸ And since 878 CE, Jerusalem was under the government of Fustat in Egypt, where some Karaites had influence on the court, so the Karaite movement in Palestine began to flourish.¹⁹ Jerusalem had a Karaite yeshiva, attracting Jewish students from Islamic and Christian countries and producing a remarkable number of Karaite scholars.²⁰ The tenth and eleventh centuries are known as their golden age, but their number declined at the end of

12 Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Fifty Key Jewish Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 114.

13 Robert Brody, “Varieties of Non-Rabbinic Judaism in Geonic and Contemporaneous Sources,” in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell et al. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2021), 139–152, esp. 146, paraphrases the name Karaites as ‘something like “biblicist”.’

14 Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites*, Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, 29 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1992), 21–22.

15 Yoram Erder, “Karaites and Sadducees,” in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell et al. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2021), 153–163, esp. 154–155; Marzena Zananowska, “Islamic Influences on the Emergence of Historical Sensibilities among the Karaites: The Story of the Tower of Babel,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 111 (2021): 389–413.

16 Most authors use the translation ‘mourners of Zion.’ Others use ‘mourners for Zion,’ because the genitive construction is most probably meant as an objective genitive.

17 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51–69, esp. 52. See Daniel J. Lasker, “Karaites and Jerusalem: From Anan ben David to the Karaite Heritage Center in the Old City,” in *Next Year in Jerusalem: Exile and Return in Jewish History*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Studies in Jewish Civilization (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019), 46, who mentions marriage contracts stating that the couple would not eat meat until the altar in Jerusalem was repaired.

18 Raymond P. Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 76.

19 Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites*, Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, 29 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1992), 29.

20 Daniel J. Lasker, “Karaites and Jerusalem: From Anan ben David to the Karaite Heritage Center in the Old City,” in *Next Year in Jerusalem: Exile and Return in Jewish History*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon, Studies in Jewish Civilization (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019), 100.

the eleventh century. The arrival of the Seljuks in 1071 CE and the First Crusade (1096–1099) put an end to the community in Jerusalem.²¹

Reflections on Minority Status

Both Jewish groups produced apologetic literature but no systematic reflection on their status of being a minority. This reflection can be found indirectly in the extensive explanations of Song of Songs, for instance in the Targum Song of Songs (TgSoS) within Rabbanite Judaism and a commentary from the Karaite movement. The first is a highly popular,²² anonymous Aramaic paraphrase in the tradition of the Targums, although it does not meet the definition of Targum.²³ TgSoS might be dated earlier, but Andrew Litke made a well-founded proposal to date it to tenth-century Byzantium.²⁴ It follows the rabbinic tradition as found in, for instance, Midrash Song of Songs. The other is a commentary by Yefet ben Eli in Judeo-Arabic, ‘littered with Hebrew and Aramaic quotations.’²⁵ He wrote his commentary in late tenth-century Jerusalem. Yefet was one of the leaders of the Mourners for Zion.

Although of different genres, both interpretations follow the text verse by verse and strive for a single correct or most plausible meaning.²⁶ Both follow the traditionally Jewish exegetical path by attributing the male voice to God (or his messiah) and the female voice to the people of Israel, using the prophetic metaphor of marriage for God’s covenant with Israel as key.²⁷ Both acknowledge Solomon as the author and specifically state that he prophesied.²⁸ In both texts, the diaspora

21 Daniel J. Lasker, “Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement,” *Jewish Thought* 3 (2021): 35–48, esp. 46.

22 Philip Alexander, “Tradition and Originality in the Targum of the Song of Songs,” in *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in Their Historical Context*, JSOT.SS, 166, ed. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 318–339, esp. 318, calls it one of the most popular and widespread books in medieval Jewry.

23 Philip Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling (Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 217–253 (234) calls it a ‘Type B Targum.’ I describe TgSoS as an apology against four opponents in Eveline van Staalduijn-Sulman, “Targum Hooglied als bemoediging en apologie in de diaspora,” in *Megillot*, ed. Nico Riemersma and Klaas Spronk, Amsterdamse Cahiers voor exegese van de Bijbel en zijn tradities, 37 (Amsterdam: Societas Hebraica Amstelodamensis, 2024), 35–44.

24 Andrew W. Litke, “Following the Frankincense: Reassessing the Sitz im Leben of Targum Song of Songs,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 27.4 (2018): 289–231. For an earlier date, see, e.g., Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 55, who dates it to the eighth or ninth century.

25 Joseph Alobaidi, *Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs I: The Commentary of Yefet ben Eli* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), ix.

26 Cf. Daniel J. Lasker, “Karaite Mourning of Zion as an Ascetic Movement,” *Jewish Thought* 3 (2021): 52.

27 E.g., Yefet refers to Ezekiel 16 and 23 in his comments on SoS 1:1.

28 See TgSoS 1:1 (‘Spirit of prophecy’) and Yefet 1:1 (‘by the Holy Spirit’).

and, therefore, the minority position of Jews within the countries they live in play a prominent role. By analysing the texts, one realizes that both authors discuss five aspects of his minority position. They (1) explain the causes of the exile and (2) describe the exile, regularly with small metaphors. They (3) encourage the readers to keep certain rules as a minority and (4) give instructions on how to protect themselves from evil. Finally, they (5) give constant reminders of God's love for his people and his promises regarding the end of the exile after the coming of the messiah. I will use these five aspects as sections in my description of both books.

Targum Song of Songs

TgSoS²⁹ starts with an enumeration of ten biblical songs, of which Song of Songs is the ninth, while the tenth will be sung when the exiles 'are redeemed from Exile' (1:1). That alone makes TgSoS applicable to readers in the diaspora and gives them hope to finally sing the last song.³⁰ After the ten songs, the composer offers an unambiguous, rabbinic interpretation for anyone who can understand a relatively simple Aramaic, but does not have the time or intellect to read the complicated midrash on the Song of Songs with all the different interpretations side by side. The translator uses a language form that resembles the official Targums, Onkelos and Jonathan, so that his work can be read in all areas where Jews use these Targums.³¹ The text presents itself as a prayer of King Solomon (1:2–3), followed by his prophecy about the history of Israel in three parts:³²

1. From the Exile of Egypt to King Solomon (in three accounts: 1:4–5:1).
2. From the Exile of Babylon to the Hasmoneans (5:2–7:11).
3. From the Exile of Edom³³ to the Coming of the King Messiah (7:12–8:13).

The text ends with a prayer by the people of Israel, asking God for protection in and salvation from exile (8:14).

29 "The Targum to Canticles according to Six Yemen MSS; compared with the 'Textus Receptus' as contained in DeLagarde's 'Hagiographia Chaldaica'," Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/targumtocanticle00melauoft/page/110/mode/2up> provides a critical edition. English quotes are adopted from Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003).

30 Esther M. Menn, "Targum of the Song of Songs and the Dynamics of Historical Allegory," in *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity: Studies in Language and Tradition*, JSOT.SS, 33, ed. Craig A. Evans (Sheffield: Sheffield Academy Press, 2000), 423–445, esp. 440 and 444.

31 Andrew W. Litke, *Targum Song of Songs and Late Jewish Literary Aramaic: Language, Lexicon, Text, and Translation*, SAIS, 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 227–228.

32 I follow the structure of Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 15, but take 1:3 as part of Solomon's prayer.

33 A chifre for Rome, referring to the fall of the Second Temple and the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem.

Causes of the Minority Position

Concerning the causes of the exile TgSoS is very short and firm: ‘this people will sin and go into exile’ (1:7), prophesied Solomon. Their sin consisted of ceasing ‘to observe the words of the Torah’ (2:15), and ‘rebellion and sedition’ (6:1). At the end of the second section the people declare they have learnt a lesson from the Assyrian and Babylonian exile: ‘So long as I walk in the ways of the Lord of the World, He causes His Shekhinah to dwell among me, and His desire is toward me. But when I deviate from His ways He removes His Shekhinah from me, and makes me wander among the nations’ (7:11).

Characteristics of the Minority Position

The separation between God and people is experienced as difficult. The people, praying and mourning, long for God’s presence, but their prayer is not answered (5:6). That causes God to say to his people that ‘My head is full of your tears’ (5:2). The rule of the nations over the Jewish minorities is expressed in ‘harsh decrees’ that are compared with ‘the scorching heat of the noonday sun’ (1:7), with thorns of a rose bush (2:2), and in the end even with ‘the blazing coals of Gehinnom’ (8:6). This harsh rule of the nations is twice explained as a result of the nations’ jealousy: Amalek was jealous because of ‘the blessing which Jacob had taken from Esau’ (2:15) and the nations in their final war against Israel will also act out of jealousy (8:6).

The diaspora makes the Jewish people feel a vulnerable minority. They describe themselves as ‘one nation on earth, whose merits are few, and who has no kings or rulers to go out and wage war’ (8:8). They also feel like a small minority theologically. Both Esau and Ishmael – figures for Christianity and Islam in those days – associate idols with the main God (1:7). That is Jesus in the case of Christianity and I presume Muhammad in the case of Islam.³⁴ Yet they receive respect from the ruling nations when they become martyrs for their purely monotheistic religion ‘and gave up [their] lives for His divinity’ (8:1). There are two exemplary prayers in the last chapter, one for the day of Salvation and return to Jerusalem (8:6) and one for the time of the diaspora itself (8:14), asking God to watch over the Jewish people in their troubles.

Required Actions in a Minority Position

Actions to be taken during the diaspora are as simple as its causes. The prophets had already set these out during the previous exile: ‘Return now in repentance, and let us rise up, you and we, and let us pray before Him, and we, with you, shall beseech [Him] for mercy’ (6:1). In practice, this means fearing God, loving the Torah, and shunning the idols of the nations (1:4, cf. 1:10), but also walking in

34 Andrew W. Litke, “Following the Frankincense: Reassessing the Sitz im Leben of Targum Song of Songs,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 27.4 (2018): 301, refers to a midrashic tradition that links Ishmael with idolatry, but prefers a connection with Christian apologetics that interprets Allah’s descriptions in the Qur’ān as a material god, a form of idolatry.

righteousness, praying, following leaders, teaching sons, going to the synagogues and the houses of study, 'and in virtue of this they will be provided for in exile, until I send them the King Messiah' (1:8). The study of the Torah is explained in rabbinic terms, right at the beginning of the book: 'the Torah ... written on the two tablets of stone, and the Six Orders of the Mishnah and Talmud by oral tradition' (1:2). Unlike Karaite Judaism that denies the divine origin of the oral Torah, the doctrine of the written and oral Torah is central in Rabbanite Judaism.³⁵ Even God Himself is said to be engaged in the study of Tanakh as well as the Six Orders of the Mishnah, 'disclosing new meanings all day long' (5:10).

Protection against Evil in a Minority Position

Walking in the ways of the Torah is not the only protection Israel receives in the diaspora, although it is a very strong one (cf. 6:8–12). The words of the Torah themselves are like a sword and debates using these words are like training sessions for swordsmen (3:8). Also, circumcision is seen as a mighty weapon against 'malicious demons and evil spirits that walk in the night' (3:8). Again opposed to Karaism, TgSoS considers the tefillin and the mezuzah as amulets 'so that the Destroyer should not have permission to harm' (8:3).³⁶ The use of the mezuzah also indicates that Jewish houses were directly recognizable.

Protection during the early days of the messiah, when the nations assemble against the Jewish people under the influence of Gog, will come from God's love (8:7) and the angels led by Michael, the Prince of Israel (8:9). The latter does impose the condition that Israel will give 'her silver to buy the unity of the name of the Lord of the world' (8:9). Raphael Loewe suggests that this is a reminder of the taxes that certain religious minorities had to pay as a licence to practise their own religion under Islamic rule (the *jizya*).³⁷ It seems unlikely to Philip Alexander that taxes will still have to be paid in the messianic era and interprets it as the command to invest their money in one's own religion and the study of the Torah, as was also said two verses earlier (8:7).³⁸

Promises about the End of the Minority Position

No matter how the history of the Jewish people turns out, God guarantees time and again that his love for Israel cannot be extinguished (8:7; cf. 1:2; 4:1.7.9). His love

35 See literature in Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 79 n.18.

36 This view is 'old and widespread,' although opposed later by Maimonides and other rationalists; see Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 192 n.13.

37 Raphael Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, Studies and Texts, 3, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 159–196, esp. 166.

38 Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 200 n.43.

for his people is greater than his love for the 70, that is, all, nations (1:2). Because of that love and the merits of the three patriarchs, the Lord guarantees deliverance from every exile (1:9.13; 2:17; 3:6). The diaspora will therefore come to an end, just as the period in Egypt and the exile in Babylon came to an end (cf. 1:9; 6:2), and it will be the Lord's pleasure 'to redeem his people from exile' (7:14). He will encourage King Messiah to 'rise and receive the kingdom that I have stored up for you' (7:14) – an apocalyptic image suggesting that the new Jerusalem and the eschatological Temple already exist in the heavens, 'simply awaiting the time when they shall descend to earth.'³⁹

The Targumist contrasts the Christian interpretation of the term 'messiah' with his own modest and double messianism. He posits two saviours, 'the messiah son of David, and the messiah son of Ephraim' (4:5; 7:4). The designation 'messiah son of Ephraim' is unique to the Targums, but this messianic figure can be identified with the Talmudic messiah ben Joseph.⁴⁰ In TgSoS this messiah seems to have no task of his own, but in other, earlier texts he is connected with the final battle on earth, against Gog and Magog.⁴¹ When King Messiah, son of David, is sent by God (7:14; 8:1), Israel will bring him to the temple to learn the fear of the Lord from him and to celebrate together (8:2). This messiah teaches them to leave it to God to punish the nations that have attacked Jerusalem (8:4). The composer of TgSoS is a 'pacifist,' believing that Israel's battles are not physical, but spiritual, and that their weapons are prayer and the study of the Torah (4:4).⁴² When Gog comes with his armies to attack Jerusalem, they will be destroyed (8:4). The angels, led by archangel Michael, will wage this war for Israel (8:9). At the end of times, the dead revive, 'even the righteous who have died in exile will come by way of tunnels below the ground' (8:5). All in all, the kingdom of the messiah will be a time in which the entire Jewish people live in their own country again, no longer as a minority scattered among the many nations.

The Mourners for Zion and Yefet ben Eli

Two commentaries on the Song of Songs were composed within the community of the Mourners for Zion.⁴³ This contribution will focus on the commentary of

39 Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 188 n.62.

40 David C. Mitchell, "Messiah bar Ephraim in the Targums," *Aramaic Studies* 4.2 (2006): 221–241, esp. 223–224.

41 In addition to Targum Zechariah 12:10, this messiah will be killed in battle, while in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Exodus 10:11, he is the one conquering the hordes of Gog. TgSoS leaves it open.

42 Philip Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, The Aramaic Bible, 17A (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 25. This pacifism was probably caused by negative experiences with active messianism and by positive experiences with the rulers of their days.

43 The first one was written by Salmon ben Jeroham in 956 CE. He considers Song of Songs a parable with a simple hermeneutical key: 'From the beginning of the book to 7:10 every expression denoting a man refers to the Creator; from 7:10 to the end of the book, such expressions refer to the messiah son of David. Whenever the feminine is employed, the congregation of Israel is intended.'

Yefet ben Eli, active during the last third of the tenth century: he emphasizes the end of time, which is his own time, and takes a vigorous stance against both Islam and Rabbanite Judaism.⁴⁴ He regards Song of Songs as a prophecy ‘in response to the prophecies of Ezekiel in which the relationship between a man and a woman is depicted negatively and Israel’s abandonment of and by God deplored. In the Song of Songs, Israel’s return to God is celebrated through the female-male relationship.’⁴⁵ After the preliminary chapters, Yefet divides the text into three parts:

1. From the fall of the Second Temple to his own time (3:1–5:1).
2. Salvation and the start of the messianic era (5:2–6:10).
3. The end of the Fourth Kingdom, i.e., the Islamic Empire (6:11–8:13).⁴⁶

Both Karaite commentaries ‘present triumphalist interpretations of the Song, focusing on the imminent salvation of Israel and the defeat of her enemies.’⁴⁷ The triumphalism strongly contrasts with the marginal position of this group, being a minority within Karaite Judaism, which in turn is a minority within the Jewish diaspora.

Causes of the Minority Position

The cause of the diaspora in Yefet’s commentary does not deviate from the cause mentioned in the Targum. However, since God’s anger has disappeared (1:2), the diaspora should have ended, but Jews have become used to being in exile (5:2).⁴⁸

Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 54.

44 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 55.

45 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 55.

46 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56.

47 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58.

48 The references to Yefet’s commentary are made by citing the verse from the Song of Songs which he is explaining.

The leaders of the Karaite Mourners summoned the people to Jerusalem, but the people did not come, and therefore they stay ‘in the Diaspora under God’s wrath’ (1:5). Moreover, the rabbis, whom he calls the Shepherds of the diaspora (1:6), force the Jewish people to keep wrong commandments, that is, prescriptions from the oral Torah. They are false prophets. That resulted in a prolongation of the people’s minority position.

Description of the Minority Position

Much of the description of the Mourners refers to their position as a double minority: their group must not only survive within the Islamic majority, but also defend itself against Rabbanite Judaism (1:5; 5:7). Regularly, a verse is also explained twice, once for the Karaite minority and once for the entire Jewish people against Muslim rule (e.g., 2:2).

The Islamic domination is compared to the heat of the sun (1:6), the desert (1:7–8), the walls of the prison (2:8–9), wintertime (2:10). The people of Israel are compared to ‘a dry fruitless branch’ (2:1), while the leaders of the Karaites fear that Israel is being corrupted by the Islamic religion (3:7–8). On the other hand, the Christian domination before the rise of Islam is compared to the night (3:1–2), whereas the ‘kingdom of Ishmael’ cancelled the harsh legislation of the Christians and made it possible ‘for the righteous to reveal themselves.’ Yefet then refers to Anan ben David, the founder of the Karaite religion (eighth century).⁴⁹ So one form of domination is not the same as another, although both had the same attitude in general: ‘To them Israel was like the drum they beat on both sides ... They beat them, despise them, and confiscate their money, spending it on their own feasts’ (7:1).

Although Islamic hegemony has been described as severe, it is not nearly as prevalent in Yefet’s book as the Rabbanite majority.⁵⁰ The rabbis are depicted as thorns (2:2) and as foxes that ruin the vineyard (2:15–16).⁵¹ They, ‘the men of the Talmud,’ are accused of putting poison in Israel’s (spiritual) food (2:13) and compared to Jeroboam and his idolatry after the division of Israel into the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms (3:1–2). This is an apt comparison for the Mourners, because Jeroboam brought the greater part of Israel with him in his rebellion against Rehoboam, who ultimately had only two tribes left. The small part remained loyal

49 Joseph Alobaidi, *Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs I: The Commentary of Yefet ben Eli* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 208 n.34.

50 Rabbanite Judaism reveals indeed a hostile attitude towards the Karaites in those days, especially in their polemical writings; see Yoram Erder, “Karaites and Sadducees,” in *Diversity and Rabbinization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell et al. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2021), 153.

51 Although Yefet uses the word heretics, Joseph Alobaidi, *Old Jewish Commentaries on the Song of Songs I: The Commentary of Yefet ben Eli* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 198 n.109, suggests that Yefet refers to the rabbis, to whom he always gives a different nickname.

to the Lord, while Jeroboam introduced idolatry to the majority by placing golden calves in the sanctuaries of Dan and Bethel. Note that the Talmud is indirectly compared to Jeroboam's idols. A second comparison is made between the rabbis and their followers and smoke: 'once up in the air, it flattens and dissolves' (3:6). It is the same for the people in the 'desert of the nations:' if they stay in the diaspora 'for a time, they vanish in it.' The Mourners were afraid that Jews would lose their identity and would assimilate to their surrounding milieu. It is an ongoing question for Yefet as to whether the Rabbanite Jews continue to live in exile out of laziness or out of sickness, that is unbelief (2:17; 3:1–2). He has them say, 'We have no desire to return leaving our livelihood and our friends who belong to these nations' (5:2–3).

Meanwhile, the 'Masters,' the leaders of the Mourners for Zion, are praised for the 'higher quality in their knowledge in comparison to the sages of the Diaspora' and for their obedience to the Torah, especially in 'observing the Sabbath, the feasts and the purity of the food and the laws concerning what is pure and what is impure' (2:13). They are 'wise men,' who have a 'unanimity in their decisions,' unlike the rabbis in the diaspora (4:3). The rabbis are thus scorned for their differences in opinion that are indeed visible in the Talmud and the Midrashim. These Masters are compared to green figs, the first small figs that indicate that winter is over and summer will come. This metaphor indicates that the group of the Mourners might seem small in comparison to the Jewish people in general, but that the group has the potential to grow and bear fruit. The winter metaphor indicates that the Islamic domination (cf. 2:10) will soon cease to be. This makes the Mourners long for God's salvation (1:1; 1:3). At the same time, they feel ill because this longing might be prolonged since the majority of the Jews do not 'join me in obeying Him' (2:5).

Required Actions in a Minority Position

There is only one required action for all the Jews in exile: leave the lands of the pagan nations (2:10) and return to the land of Israel. Leaving the rabbis and the other evil Jews is compared to pruning branches of a tree (2:13). The returnees should also acknowledge the leaders of the Mourners, leave the Talmudic regulations and live as one community in the land 'avoiding any exchange with the nations' religions' (8:9). As a community in and around Jerusalem, expecting to grow into a majority position there, they can again live according to the Torah, according to the Masters' interpretation, and ask God for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the reinstitution of the Levitic tribe, and the restoration of the liturgy (1:2).

Protection against Evil in a Minority Position

Protection against evil is linked to gathering in Jerusalem and forming a praying community there. The true guards of the Jewish people are the Mourners for Zion, 'who come from the Exile to the Land of Israel, devoting themselves to knowledge,

perpetually “seeking Him by prayer and supplications” (Dan. 9:3), never desisting from this until they have beheld the Salvation.”⁵²

Promises about the End of the Minority Position

Yefet gives a huge number of statements about the Messianic Era, albeit not in any order. A reconstruction will be given in this section. The first generation of Karaite Masters in Jerusalem is compared to short-lived winter flowers (2:1), while the Masters of Yefet’s time are compared to lilies, *shoshanim* in Hebrew, ‘for like lilies they have come forth in the spring – the spring of Israel’s salvation.’⁵³ Soon after his own time, the end will come and God will intervene on behalf of his people. It will lead to a restoration of the Solomonic Era, but even more paradisiacal.

The Glory of God will return to Jerusalem (1:12), while God will bring his people out of the diaspora as soon as he has destroyed the pagan kingdoms (1:7; 2:3; 2:8–9). He will do that by installing hostility between them. He will not only end the domination of the gentiles, but also all false deities (2:3). In a final battle, God will smash Gog on behalf of his people (8:14). The return of the Jews will be profound: even the Jews from Nubia and from the Ten Tribes will return to Jerusalem (8:11–12). Elijah will appear and organize this return, like Moses in the return from Egypt and Cyrus at the end of the Babylonian Exile (2:10). The messiah will also come back from exile (8:5) and he will be anointed by Elijah (3:11). Then the time of the restoration is established with the Davidic messianic kingship and a new high priest (1:13–14), both of whom shall be succeeded by their sons (4:5). The Levites will be reinstalled, with their instruments and songs (4:12), receiving gifts and first fruits (4:2). The messiah will rebuild the sanctuary after his installation on the throne (8:14), and the people will receive the right to sacrifice and undertake pilgrimages to Jerusalem (1:4). Then the people will also receive ‘the blessings upon the children, the flocks, the incomes, the fruits.’ (1:12).

The entire scene becomes more wondrous because of God performing miracles to the land, such as ‘desalinate the Dead Sea’ (cf. Ezek. 47:10–12), and giving trees the possibility to yield fruit every month (1:13–14). When all is peaceful, the Jewish believers will go up to the Temple with the messiah to ‘drink’ the Torah of God (8:1). At that time, God’s never-ending love will be visible for everyone (8:7) and Israel will be ‘a sweet fragrance for all the nations on earth’ (1:2). At that time, the minority position is not only abolished, but Israel will then be a blessed and self-sufficient nation, protected by God against whatever enemy there might be.

52 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 60.

53 Frank Daniel, “Karaite Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58.

Discussion: Two Approaches to Being a Minority

There is agreement between TgSoS and Yefet ben Eli's commentary in the manner of exegesis and even in some details. Both approach the book as a prophecy by Solomon about the time to come until the Messianic Era. Both call for following the precepts they adhere to and are concerned about the 'uniqueness of God's name' – a circumscription of strict monotheism. Both refer to Israel as the chosen people of God, who must repent in order to return to Jerusalem, where a new temple will eventually be built under the kingship of the Davidic messiah. Both describe the diaspora in general, negative terms, such as sleep, heat, or winter.

TgSoS keeps a strictly chronological order, starting from the Exodus and ending with a messianic era that may still be far in the future. 'In contrast, the Karaites regard most of the Song as an apocalyptic prophecy relating to their own time – a prophecy that, to be sure, represents earlier episodes in Jewish history, but only as necessary background to the messianic present.'⁵⁴ They must actively engage in God's salvation history with fasting, lamenting, and prayer to let the final act of Israel's history appear, while the readers of TgSoS are admonished to pacifism and nothing more than keeping the commandments as given in the Written and Oral Torah. The crux of the matter, however, is whether the Jewish people should return to Jerusalem on their own, without a prophet to lead them. The rabbis urge their readers to wait until the messiah comes, encouraging them to gather wisdom in the diaspora (TgSoS 8:7), while the Mourners regard the return as imperative. The zealotry of the Mourners of Zion might appear more dangerous to the authorities, but through their asceticism, prayer, and emphasis on study, they have created a harmless exterior. The poor status of the Mourners also functions through social creativity⁵⁵ as a positive trait: their way of living will hasten the coming of the messiah and is therefore preferable to the easy Rabbanite way of living in the diaspora.

TgSoS also provides a form of social creativity, in that the nations are not only a threat to Judaism but are also jealous of Israel's chosen place in God's kingdom. Flourishing as a minority group is not the issue in either work: the pressure from outside and from within is high, and surviving seems the primary goal. The most that can be said is that their theology of hope provides courage for the future, albeit that the Mourners are more active in acquiring that hope than the rabbis. At the end, both groups place their hope in God's intervention and pray for his help.

Both authors see the minority position not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in terms of strength and perseverance. A minority, spread over so many places, runs the risk of losing its cohesion, while individuals run the risk of adapting in

54 Frank Daniel, "Karaites Commentaries on the Song of Songs from Tenth-Century Jerusalem," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Dov Walfish, and Joseph Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56.

55 Maarten Johannes van Bezouw, Joanneke Toorn, Julia Christina Becker, "Social Creativity: Reviving a Social Identity Approach to Social Stability," *European Journal for Social Psychology* 51 (2021): 409–422, esp. 411, with the exact example 'being poor is pious.'

such a way that they become absorbed into the majority. This results in two different reactions: TgSoS calls for adherence to the rabbinic rules, although it describes Israel as a weak unity, while Yefet calls for a return to Jerusalem in order to restore the people's coherence and strengthen its identity. This also shows that the rabbis saw the preservation of their own identity in exile as a good possibility, but that the Mourners feared dilution. This is probably related to the different minority positions they held: the Rabbis were the majority within the Jewish people, had relatively good relations with the Islamic governments, had organized schools and academies, and had codified their teachings and regulations in the Talmud, while the Mourners were a minority within Karaism, a minority within Judaism, who had just started writing down their teachings and organizing their schooling system. The Rabbanite part of Jewry had built far more 'social capital'⁵⁶ than the Karaite part, and felt therefore more secure, and had more to lose if they were to return to Jerusalem.

Rabbanite leaders are overwhelmingly attacked more by Yefet than external rulers because he saw the majority as a serious threat to the survival of Judaism in general and to his own group in particular.⁵⁷ That suggests that the Mourners felt they had much more to fear from the Rabbanite majority than from Islamic domination or that they had more influence on their fellow Jews than on the authorities. Both groups indicate that they fear Christians more than Islamic rulers. The way both books describe the non-Jewish majority – in general terms and with references to their decrees – suggests that both groups were more troubled by the government than by the non-Jewish people around them in the places where they lived. In both books, minoritization⁵⁸ plays a role in that governments suppress the Jewish minority in general – the Christian governments more than the Islamic ones – and in their negative self-perception as weak and sinful. Both groups show a survival mentality in their works and a withdrawal from the majority society, although the Mourners see an adaptation in the Rabbanite circles: they have friends in the exilic neighbourhood they live in and want to stay where they are.

Another difference is that the Mourners complain about the suppression of the Karaites by the rabbis, a phenomenon that feeds their feelings of being marginalized and prompts their withdrawal – this time quite literally, namely their withdrawal in Jerusalem. That means that the minoritization in the case of the rabbis is externally motivated by the Christian and Muslim governments and in the case of the Mourners partly internally motivated, visible in their return to Jerusalem and

56 A term coined by Pierre Bourdieu for 'productive investments in social relations ... on which the participants gain a return by virtue of their membership in a social network.' Mark E. Warren, "The Nature and Logic of Bad Social Capital," in *The Handbook of Social Capital*, ed. Dario Castiglione, Jan van Deth, Guglielmo Wolleb, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 122–149, esp. 124.

57 See also the similar situation of Christian and Jewish minorities in Chapter 9 of this volume, "Aphrahat and the Jews" by Nathan Witkamp, where both groups had no power to change the government and both feared losing people to the other side.

58 Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. Jonathan Andres (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87–98, esp. 87.

their choice for fasting, mourning, and praying. Their failure to get the majority of Judaism involved in this movement towards Jerusalem frustrated them so much that they saw the Rabbanite majority as enemies more than the non-Jewish majority in the countries from which they left. The fierce criticism of the diaspora leaders by Yefet is also related to the fact that as a Jerusalem community they hoped for their own position, separate from Islam. Both groups longed for their homeland, but the Mourners already started to settle there in the hope of becoming a majority in Jerusalem.

With regard to good practices of living a peaceful life as a religious minority, both groups agree on internal coherence and keeping the rules of their own tradition, albeit that those rules differ. Perseverance is especially encouraged in the Targum, even to the point of possible martyrdom. The Mourners give the impression that their rules are being countered by the rabbis.⁵⁹ Both groups base themselves on Scripture, but the Rabbanites adapted their applications to their situation, while the Mourners tried to apply Scripture as purely as they could. The Mourners viewed the variety of interpretations and applications of Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism as a travesty and contrasted this with their own simplicity of interpretation and lifestyle. Through social creativity, they were able to transform the limitations of their own group into a positive characteristic: they were the small early figs that would ripen until the harvest.

Conclusion

Two Jewish groups betray in their explanation and application of Song of Songs their view on being a minority. Their view on the causes and the circumstances of the diaspora are almost similar. Their way of living and searching for protection only differ because these groups have their own interpretation of Scripture and their own set of rules on how to live. The main difference is that the Rabbanites do not have any theological arguments or sociological inclination to lift the exile themselves and actively strive for a majority society somewhere else, and that the Mourners for Zion offer both. Therefore, the Rabbis do not explicitly oppose the authorities and other religious groups too often, while the Karaites do so very explicitly and very frequently. It was the Karaites who had the most to lose in terms of their identity and group formation.

59 One example is mentioned by Nathan Schur, *History of the Karaites*, Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, 29 (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1992), 32: The Karaites 'had to close their shops not only on their own festivals, but also on the Rabbanite ones.'

8 When the Margins Become the Centre

Jews, Statehood, and Belonging

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Abstract

This contribution explores how Jews shifted from marginalized diaspora communities to a national majority in Israel, using the concept of minoritization to illuminate the social and political dynamics involved. It shows how gaining collective power reshaped inclusion and exclusion, not only within Jewish society – particularly between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi groups – but also in relation to Palestinian Arabs, who became increasingly marginalized. By tracing this historical trajectory, the contribution highlights the tensions that emerge when a formerly minority group becomes dominant, revealing patterns of empowerment, displacement, and inequality. The Israeli case thus challenges simple understandings of majority and minority, demonstrating how historical, cultural, and political forces intersect to shape identity, belonging, and power in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

Keywords: minoritization, Jewish identity, Israel, Ashkenazi-Mizrahi relations, Palestinian Arabs, minority-majority dynamics

Introduction

Historically, Jews have been in a vulnerable position as a religious and ethnic minority. They experienced cultural, legal, and economic marginalization in Europe. They were accepted but subservient in the Islamic world. The Holocaust was the historical culmination of this marginalization, while the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 marked a dramatic shift in Jews' relationship to surrounding societies and to each other. With the emergence of Israel as a nation-state, a historically marginalized group had access to sovereign authority as a national majority. This historical change provides a new lens through which to view notions of minority and majority.

Of course, this situation is not entirely new. Prior to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans and the subsequent exile (70 CE), Jews lived as a self-governing majority in their ancestral homeland, with political, social, and religious structures that reflected their communal sovereignty. This historical

experience became a foundational reference for Jewish theology and collective memory, framing exile as a temporary condition and the restoration of Jewish rule as both a historical and divinely ordained goal. Biblical narratives, messianic expectations, and rabbinic writings reinforced the idea that Jews were destined to return to their land, sustaining a sense of national identity and a longed-for political and spiritual restoration throughout centuries of diaspora.

The creation of the modern State of Israel, however, represents a historically unprecedented realization of this vision. Unlike prior periods of Jewish sovereignty, the contemporary state emerged through mass immigration, political organization, and legal-political frameworks in a context shaped by modern nationalism, European colonial legacies, and international diplomacy. Jews became a numerical and political majority not merely through theological expectation, but through deliberate state-building processes. This dual character – rooted in historical memory and theological tradition yet enacted through modern historical and political mechanisms – produced new social hierarchies within Jewish society, reshaped relationships with Palestinian Arabs, and introduced novel dynamics of minoritization, making Israel both a fulfilment of long-standing aspirations and a unique experiment in majority power.

This contribution uses the theoretical framework of minoritization to examine this historical trajectory of Jews from minority to majority status. It argues that the Jews' transition from membership in marginalized diaspora communities to a national majority in Israel has wider ramifications for understanding inclusion, exclusion, and minority power dynamics. It also draws attention to tensions inherent in this shift: when one group is empowered, others may be marginalized or displaced. In the Israeli context, this encompasses both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi intra-Jewish hierarchies as well as Palestinian Arabs.¹ The contribution concludes by demonstrating how the Jewish case study complicates understandings of minority-majority dynamics in history.

Theoretical Framework: Majority, Minority, and Minoritization

The concepts of 'majority' and 'minority' might appear straightforward, seemingly referring only to the numerical proportions of groups within a population.

1 Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews are three broad cultural groupings within the Jewish people, shaped by geography and history. *Ashkenazi Jews* trace their communal roots to Central and Eastern Europe (Germany, Poland, Russia, etc.), developing distinctive languages (such as Yiddish) and religious customs influenced by European settings. *Sephardic Jews* descend from Jewish communities in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) who were expelled in the late fifteenth century; they and their descendants settled around the Mediterranean, including in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, maintaining traditions shaped by Iberian heritage. *Mizrahi Jews* (literally 'Eastern' Jews) originate from the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region (Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Morocco, etc.), with cultural and liturgical practices influenced by the Islamic world. In modern usage, *Sephardic* and *Mizrahi* are often blurred or used interchangeably, since many Mizrahi communities adopted Sephardic liturgical traditions after the expulsion from Spain, but historically they refer to distinct origins.

Yet both sociological and political theory emphasize that these terms carry far deeper significance, relating to power dynamics, social positioning, and systemic inequality. As the volume's introduction notes, a minority is not defined solely by its numbers but also by its shared sense of solidarity and commitment to preserving cultural, religious, or linguistic traditions. Minorities can retain social influence or political power, while still being positioned as subordinate in relation to dominant groups. In this sense, minority status is inherently relational: it emerges from the interplay between the community in question and the wider society, encompassing both external pressures and internal perceptions of vulnerability or marginality.

Closely connected to the concept of minority is 'minoritization,' which refers to the processes through which groups are actively defined, marginalized, and treated as subordinate. As highlighted in the volume's introduction, minoritization can operate from the outside, through overt social, legal, or political discrimination, or from within, when communities internalize a sense of inferiority and adopt strategies of withdrawal or survival. This dynamic, ongoing process shapes both the lived experiences and collective identities of minority groups. Michael Stausberg, Alexander Van Der Haven, and Erica Baffelli emphasize that minoritization encompasses the process leading to the creation of minority communities while also highlighting the interdependence of majorities and minorities: 'there is no majoritization without minoritization and vice versa,'² as dominant groups rely on subordinate ones to define and maintain their own status.

Theoretical perspectives from Michael Omi and Howard Winant further clarify these dynamics, describing minority status as a 'relation of inequality' rather than a simple demographic category.³ Minority groups are not only numerically smaller; they experience systemic disadvantage in access to political authority, economic resources, and social privileges. In this framework, minoritization is not a fixed condition but a set of ongoing processes – including legal restrictions, spatial segregation, economic marginalization, and cultural stigmatization – that reinforce a group's subordinate status. Integrating this perspective with the volume's nuanced understanding of minority and minoritization allows for a richer analysis of the Jewish experience, illustrating how Jewish communities in both diaspora and modern Israel have navigated fluctuating positions of vulnerability, power, and collective identity, shaped by broader social, political, and historical forces.

Minority status is a relational and context-dependent category, not a primordial or essential condition. As the volume's introduction emphasizes, being a minority involves more than numerical inferiority; it is shaped by social, cultural, and political positioning within a wider society. In contrast, minoritization refers to the processes by which a group is actively constructed, marginalized, and treated as

2 Michael Stausberg, Alexander Van Der Haven, and Erica Baffelli, "Religious Minorities: Conceptual Perspectives" In *Religious Minorities Online*, ed. Erica Baffelli, Alexander van der Haven and Michael Stausberg (Berlin: Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 1–30 (4).

3 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 56.

subordinate. While minority status can exist without extensive oppression, minoritization emphasizes the dynamics of power and exclusion that define how a group is perceived and treated – externally by dominant communities and internally through collective self-perception. As Alain Fenet notes, minority is ‘not ethnological, but belongs to the legal-political vocabulary,’ reflecting a ‘relationship of domination.’ Understanding minority and minoritization as distinct yet interconnected concepts allows for a clearer analysis of how social hierarchies are created, maintained, and contested across time and space.

Many religious minorities simultaneously occupy ethnic, racial, or linguistic minority positions, meaning their experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping axes of identity such as gender, class, and socioeconomic status. Individuals’ group affiliations are often multiple and complex; religious, professional, economic, and ethnic divisions cross-cut and coexist ubiquitously. This multifaceted reality cautions against essentializing any one marker as definitive of minority status.

The founding of Israel in 1948 exemplifies a formal reversal of minoritization, as Jews shifted from a diasporic minority dispersed across multiple countries to a majority within a sovereign territorial state. This transition illustrates that minoritization is not solely about numerical inferiority but is fundamentally tied to structural and symbolic power: the ability to govern, control institutions, and shape national narratives. In this case, majoritization – the acquisition of political sovereignty and social authority – enabled Jews to redefine their collective status, transforming both their legal and cultural position. The Israeli example shows how the reversal of minoritization involves intertwined political, social, and symbolic dimensions, highlighting the relational nature of minority and majority status.

Yet, despite this majoritarian status, internal hierarchies and lingering minoritized consciousness endure within Israeli society. Ashkenazi Jews initially dominated Israeli institutions and often held orientalist attitudes toward Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other non-European Jews, perpetuating new forms of minoritization.⁴ Simultaneously, Palestinians who remained within Israel’s borders after 1948 became an ethnic and political minority, illustrating how those formerly minoritized can enact new structures of exclusion.⁵

This dialectic highlights the relational and negotiated nature of majority-minority identities. As Homi Bhabha argues, identities are not static but are continuously produced through hybridity, memory, and power dynamics.⁶ The Jewish-Israeli experience thus demands a dynamic understanding of frameworks of minority and majority, challenging simplistic or static notions of oppression and dominance.

4 Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims,” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 5–35.

5 Nadim N. Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 64–90.

6 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 57.

Legacies of Jewish Minoritization: Historical Experiences and Theoretical Reflections

The Jewish historical experience offers a compelling lens through which to examine how minoritization operates across diverse contexts. In Christian Europe, Jews were cast as theological outsiders whose conditional emancipation reinforced majority norms, while in Muslim lands the dhimmi system institutionalized a parallel form of subordination that combined protection with exclusion. Despite their differences, both contexts positioned Jews as liminal figures – granted partial recognition yet never fully incorporated into the political community. These trajectories converge in the enduring image of Jews as ‘perpetual strangers,’ a symbolic other against which majority identities were constituted. Taken together, these histories reveal that minoritization is not a fixed condition but a dynamic and relational process, continually reshaped by legal, cultural, and political structures of power.

Europe: Legal Exclusion, Assimilation, and the Limits of Emancipation

In majority Christian Europe, Jews were historically one of the most clearly minoritized groups. The roots of their marginalization were initially theological, stemming from Christian accusations of deicide and spiritual blindness. These religiously based hostilities institutionalized Jews’ exclusion through ghettos, forced conversions, expulsions, and restrictions on property ownership and professions, marking them as outsiders within the European social and legal order.⁷

The Enlightenment and the rise of modern nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries introduced complex contradictions. While some Western European states – most notably France and Germany – granted Jews formal emancipation and civil rights, these rights were often conditional upon assimilation and the relinquishment of distinct Jewish cultural identity. This ‘emancipation through assimilation’ reflected what theorists of minoritization emphasize: legal recognition often depends on a subordinated group conforming to the dominant culture’s norms, thereby reproducing power hierarchies.⁸ Thus, even when Jews were formally ‘included,’ their difference was still problematized, producing a conditional and unstable belonging that scholars such as Omi and Winant describe as a ‘relation of inequality’ rather than a mere demographic fact.⁹

The Dreyfus Affair in France (1894–1906) exemplified the fragility of Jewish belonging. The wrongful conviction of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French army officer and assimilated Jew, illuminated how anti-Semitic discourse could surge even within liberal, secular republics. Dreyfus was convicted of espionage despite flimsy evidence, and the case created a storm of controversy lasting over a decade.

7 David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 45–48.

8 Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 102–105.

9 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 56.

His wrongful conviction highlighted how minority status is not just about law or numbers but about the social and cultural narratives that sustain exclusion.¹⁰

In Eastern Europe, the minoritization of Jews was more violent and explicit.¹¹ Pogroms, restrictions on residency within the Pale of Settlement, and exclusion from political life produced acute forms of marginalization that led to mass emigration. This trajectory exemplifies how minority groups often exist under compounded pressures, facing not only social exclusion but also physical threats and displacement.

Middle East and North Africa: Dhimmi Status and Ambivalence

Jewish life in Muslim-majority contexts was shaped by the dhimmi system – a legal and social framework that granted Jews limited protection and communal autonomy in exchange for acknowledgement of Muslim dominance and payment of the *jizya* tax. This arrangement enabled Jewish communities to flourish culturally and economically but perpetuated their secondary, subordinated status.¹² As such, the dhimmi system can be understood as a structured form of minoritization, one that preserved Jewish identity while codifying inequality and exclusion from political sovereignty.

Minoritization in this context was marked by ambivalence: Jews were neither fully included nor entirely excluded, inhabiting a liminal space. This ambivalence reflects Stuart Hall's concept of identity as fluid and constructed within power relations rather than fixed or essential.¹³ The fragile coexistence could – and did – break down during periods of political upheaval, as in the Farhud pogrom in Baghdad in 1941, when rising nationalist and fascist ideologies worsened intercommunal relations.¹⁴ The rise of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century further redefined

10 Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 27–32.

11 Historically, Jewish life in Eastern Europe shifted over time. From the late Middle Ages (the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), many Jews fled persecution and expulsions in Western Europe and were welcomed by rulers in Poland-Lithuania and other parts of Eastern Europe, where they enjoyed relative protection and communal autonomy. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, large Jewish communities flourished there, making Eastern Europe the centre of Ashkenazi life. However, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century with events such as the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648–1649), Jews experienced massacres and growing restrictions. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under Russian and Habsburg rule, Jews faced legal segregation (e.g., the *Pale of Settlement*), economic marginalization, and recurrent pogroms. Thus, while early settlement in Eastern Europe offered refuge, later centuries saw the intensification of exclusion and violence.

12 Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 99–101.

13 Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 44–46.

14 Moshe Gat, "The Farhud: Roots of the 1941 Pogrom in Baghdad," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49.5 (2013): 725–730.

Jewish identity as alien, intensifying minoritization processes that culminated in large-scale Jewish exoduses from Arab countries.¹⁵

Jews as ‘Perpetual Strangers’: the Social Construction of Minority Identity

Central to these diverse historical experiences is the enduring framing of Jews as ‘perpetual strangers.’ This social positioning, as David Nirenberg explains, involves the use of Jews as a symbolic ‘other’ against which majority identities are constituted and legitimated.¹⁶ This dynamic is foundational to the process of minoritization: the dominant majority constructs and maintains boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through discourses that mark certain groups as inherently different, threatening, or undesirable.

This ‘othering’ operates on ontological and political levels: Jews were often seen as guests, clients, or foreigners, lacking full political agency and belonging – even when legally recognized as citizens. Hannah Arendt famously argued that the Jews’ history of statelessness and exclusion was not accidental but rooted in a long-standing political non-belonging within European modernity.¹⁷ From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Edward Said’s notion of ‘contrapuntal reading’ where minorities are understood as existing simultaneously inside and outside dominant narratives, shaping and shaped by their marginalization.¹⁸ In other words, a contrapuntal reading emphasizes how minority voices are not simply absent or opposed to dominant narratives, but entangled with them. For example, Jewish writers in Europe often drew on the dominant Christian or national cultural frameworks even as they subtly reinterpreted or resisted them, thereby showing how minorities both shape and are shaped by majority discourses.

Minoritization is not a static or uniform condition; rather, it emerges through dynamic relationships shaped by political, social, and cultural contexts. Scholars in postcolonial and critical race theory emphasize that minority and majority categories are interdependent, and that identities shaped under minoritization frequently involve hybridity, negotiation, and complex ambivalence.¹⁹ The Jewish historical experience encapsulates this complexity, illustrating how minority status is constructed and reconstructed across time and space.

Zionism and the Idea of National Majority

The rise of Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a pivotal rupture from the diasporic condition that had long defined Jewish existence.

15 Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), 142–146.

16 David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 23.

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 269.

18 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 59–61.

19 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 64–68.

Confronted with persistent exclusion, systemic antisemitism, and political vulnerability across Europe and the wider diaspora, Zionism articulated a nationalist vision grounded in the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland. This vision represented not merely a geographic return but a profound political transformation: from a minoritized, stateless population to a sovereign majority with institutional power and territorial sovereignty.

Theologically, the notion of *galut* or exile had traditionally emphasized divine redemption through the Messiah's arrival. Yet, secular Zionist thinkers – most notably Theodor Herzl, galvanized by events such as the Dreyfus Affair – reframed Jewish salvation as a human political project. Herzl's 1896 pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) called for the creation of a secular, modern nation-state where Jews could escape statelessness and achieve equality and security on their own terms.²⁰ This redefinition of Jewish identity from diaspora minority to political majority reflected a complex interaction between the desire to overcome minoritization and the adoption of European nationalist frameworks that themselves operated through exclusionary majoritarian logics.²¹

Zionism, therefore, was both revolutionary and paradoxical. It sought to overturn Jewish marginalization by embracing the mechanisms of majoritization – statehood, sovereignty, and collective self-determination – while inadvertently reproducing internal stratifications and engaging in the displacement of the Palestinian population. This duality illustrates how processes of majoritization and minoritization are interlinked, often entailing the reconfiguration rather than the outright elimination of hierarchical social relations.²²

Competing Visions within Zionism

Zionism was never monolithic but consisted of diverse and often conflicting ideologies:²³

- Political Zionism, spearheaded by Herzl, prioritized pragmatic state-building and international diplomacy.
- Labour Zionism, led by figures like David Ben-Gurion, infused socialist ideals, emphasizing Jewish labour and agricultural self-sufficiency as means to national rejuvenation.

20 Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (Leipzig and Vienna: M. Breitenstein's Verlag, 1896); trans. as *The Jewish State* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 29–42.

21 Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 549–552.

22 Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

23 Anne Perez, *Understanding Zionism: History and Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2023).

- Cultural Zionism, championed by Ahad Ha'am, stressed the revival of Hebrew language and Jewish cultural life over immediate political sovereignty.
- Religious Zionism, articulated by leaders such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, combined nationalist aspirations with messianic and biblical fulfilment.

Despite these differences, their common aim was the eradication of Jewish minoritization through collective empowerment and national majority status.

However, Zionism's emphasis on political sovereignty was not universally accepted within the Jewish world. Many Orthodox Jews viewed the movement as premature or heretical, holding that only divine intervention could restore Jewish nationhood. Conversely, Reform Jews and assimilated communities, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, feared that Zionism would undermine their integration and loyalty to their countries of residence.²⁴

Moreover, Zionism's leadership was predominantly Ashkenazi and European, often neglecting the histories, voices, and concerns of Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions. This Eurocentric bias – a bias also evident in European colonialism writ large – shaped the nascent Israeli society's internal dynamics, contributing to ethnic divisions and hierarchies that reflected older patterns of minoritization transplanted into a new geopolitical context.²⁵

The Problem of Palestine: Zionism, Majoritization, and the Inversion of Marginality

Zionism's pursuit of establishing a Jewish majority in Palestine presented a core political and moral dilemma: Palestine was already home to a significant and expanding Arab population by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Zionists, the vision of Jewish national rebirth required not only immigration and settlement but also substantial demographic transformation. This brought Jewish aspirations into direct conflict with the indigenous Palestinian Arab community.

While some early Zionist thinkers hoped for coexistence, the movement's structural commitment to majoritization – shifting Jews from a marginalized diaspora to a local majority – made conflict difficult to avoid.²⁶ From the Palestinian perspective, Zionism appeared as a settler-colonial project, aiming to create a new demographic and political order at their expense. As Rashid Khalidi and others have shown, Palestinians experienced Zionism as a disruptive, displacing force, echoing patterns evident in other colonial contexts.²⁷

24 Carolyn Shaffer, "Guarding the Gates of Zion: Hasidic Arguments Against Zionism," *Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society* 4.1 (2010), 10–17.

25 Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 5–35.

26 Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

27 Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020).

Zionist leaders themselves recognized these contradictions. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which Britain endorsed the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine without consulting the Arab population, heightened tensions in the region. In the following decades, figures such as David Ben-Gurion, a principal architect of Israeli statehood, acknowledged the likelihood of Arab resistance but argued that sustained Jewish immigration and land acquisition would eventually secure Jewish political dominance.

Majoritization

Political theorists increasingly stress that majority and minority are not merely numerical categories but political constructs, shaped by legal frameworks, institutional authority, and national narratives.²⁸ Majoritization describes the strategies through which a dominant group secures demographic and political advantage, whereas minoritization refers to the processes that render a group structurally marginalized, regardless of its population. These processes are evident in the history of the Israeli state, where legal, demographic, and spatial strategies worked together to define who belonged and who did not.

From Immigration to Majoritization

Over time, majoritization became the central objective of Zionist politics, pursued through mass Jewish immigration, systematic land acquisition, and the development of parallel institutions – schools, unions, militias (such as the Haganah), and political organizations able to lay the foundation for statehood.²⁹ This reimagined the minority-majority relationship: Jews, long excluded throughout the diaspora, now aimed to assert sovereignty and dominance in Palestine, but this transformation also restructured relations with Palestinians, raising new ethical and political challenges.

A hallmark of Zionist ideology was the reversal of Jewish marginality. Where Jews in exile had been historically powerless and disenfranchised, the Zionist project sought to recast them as self-reliant, territorially rooted, and sovereign – an image inflected by European nationalist ideals around masculinity, strength, and defence. However, in adopting these paradigms, Zionism also replicated exclusionary hierarchies – between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, between secular and

28 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

29 Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 87–104; Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 62–67; Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 315–330; Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 107–120.

religious groups, and most pointedly between Jews and Palestinians. Thus, the quest for empowerment entailed displacement and domination as much as liberation.

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 marked a watershed in Jewish history. It was the first time in nearly two millennia that Jews became a majority wielding sovereign power in a defined territory. For many Jews, Israel offered not just refuge but the promise of normalized majority status in a defined territorial state, breaking decisively from the historical condition of marginalization in the diaspora. Yet the fulfilment of Jewish statehood also raised pressing challenges: Palestine was already inhabited, and the project of building a Jewish majority in the land inevitably involved both demographic transformation and legal institutionalization. Indeed, the founding of the state also fundamentally altered the regional demographic and political landscape. Although Jews made up about one-third of Mandatory Palestine's population in 1947, the events of the Nakba – when 700,000 to 750,000 Palestinians were displaced through conflict, fear, or force – in the War of Independence that broke out immediately following the proclamation of the State of Israel, swiftly transformed Jews into a clear majority.³⁰

Oren Yiftachel describes Israel as an 'ethnocracy' – a regime where the state apparatus is captured by a dominant ethno-national group (in this case, Jews), which structures citizenship and territory to reinforce its primacy while incorporating others in subordinate or conditional terms.³¹ Others contend that Israel maintains a meaningful, if often tense, balance between its Jewish and democratic commitments, offering significant political and legal rights to non-Jewish citizens, while also protecting Jewish national self-determination.³²

Policies of Majoritization

From its inception, the Israeli state pursued policies to establish and preserve a Jewish majority through legal and demographic mechanisms. The 1950 Law of Return granted Jews worldwide the right to immigrate and acquire citizenship, highlighting the state's foundational commitment to Jewish ingathering and revival. Enshrined in the 1952 Citizenship Law, these rights created a categorical distinction: Jews were enfranchised as automatic citizens, while others – chiefly Palestinian Arabs – were subject to restrictive criteria.

In parallel, the Absentees' Property Law (1950) authorized the state to expropriate properties belonging to Palestinians displaced during the 1948 war. From the Israeli perspective, this was a necessary measure to stabilize a war-torn society and repurpose land for development and security. Yet for Palestinians, this legislation

30 United Nations, General Assembly. Official Records of the Second Session, Supplement No. 11: Report of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP). UN Doc. A/364. Lake Success, NY: United Nations, 3 September 1947.

31 Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

32 David Ellenson, "The Ethical Conundrum of a Jewish and Democratic State," *Journal of Jewish Ethics* 6.2 (2021): 164–184.

formalized dispossession and denied the right of return, codifying exclusions rooted in trauma and conflict. While some Palestinians who remained became Israeli citizens, their inclusion was limited: they faced military rule until 1966, discriminatory land and housing policies, and constrained access to state resources.

The occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after the 1967 war added new complexity to Israel's majority-minority relations. Millions of Palestinians came under Israeli control without acquiring citizenship, creating stark distinctions between citizens, non-citizens, and subjects of military rule. While Israeli governments maintain that permanent status awaits a negotiated political solution, critics argue that the prolonged occupation and expanding settlement enterprise have entrenched a 'regime of separation.'³³

Legal scholars debate whether, over time, Palestinians in occupied territories have acquired a moral and legal claim to Israeli citizenship under international law – a debate made all the more urgent by stalled peace talks, deepening entrenchment, and demographic shifts.³⁴ Yet successive Israeli governments have sought to avoid that outcome, resulting in a system where sovereignty, rights, and territory are unevenly distributed across ethnic and legal lines.

Within this framework, Israeli citizenship did not always translate into full national integration. As Nadim Rouhana argues, Palestinian citizens were often perceived not as co-nationals but as a potential fifth-column threat, situated between inclusion and exclusion – legally enfranchised but symbolically alien.³⁵

The contradictions facing Israel's efforts to be both Jewish and democratic have become more pronounced in recent decades. The 2018 Nation-State Basic Law affirmed the Jewish people's exclusive right to self-determination and prioritized Hebrew as the sole official language.³⁶ Critics argued that the law excluded Palestinian citizens from the shared national ethos, further entrenching symbolic inequality. Among the most contested legal mechanisms is the 2003 Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law, which restricts family reunification between Israeli citizens – primarily Palestinians – and spouses from the West Bank or Gaza. Supporters defend the law on security and demographic grounds, while opponents, including Israel's former Chief Justice Aharon Barak, have challenged its constitutionality and impact on human rights.³⁷

33 Oren Yiftachel, "Deepening Apartheid: The Political Geography of Colonizing Israel/Palestine," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022): Article 981867.

34 Oren Yiftachel, "Neither Two States Nor One: The Disengagement and 'Creeping Apartheid' in Israel/Palestine," *The Arab World Geographer* 8, no. 3 (2005): 125–129.

35 Nadim Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

36 Yoav Arad and Michael Freedman, "The Crises of Israeli Democracy: Political-Ideological Framings by Members of Israel's 24th Knesset," *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2025): Article 1530752; Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "Is Israel a Liberal Democracy?" *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, December 2024, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/is-israel-a-liberal-democracy/>.

37 Hassan Jabareen and Suhad Bishara, "The Jewish Nation-State Law: Antecedents and Constitutional Implications," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 46–55.

These legal structures reflect and reinforce deeper dynamics of ethnic majoritarianism, where concerns about maintaining demographic balance justify policies that disproportionately constrain minority citizens.

Within the Majority: Ethnic Stratification among Jews

Even within the Jewish majority, Israel has confronted internal divisions and hierarchies. Ashkenazi Jews, primarily from Europe, initially populated the state elite, dominating the military, bureaucracy, and public culture. Mizrahi Jews, who arrived in large numbers from Arab and Muslim countries, often faced paternalism and marginalization. They were frequently resettled in development towns on the geographic periphery, placed in lower-status jobs, and encouraged, or pressured, to assimilate to Ashkenazi norms.

This ‘melting pot’ model sought to unify immigrant populations under a common Israeli identity but often suppressed cultural difference and reinforced socio-economic disparities. While Mizrahi Jews later gained political and cultural influence, these internal asymmetries complicated the image of a homogeneous majority and reveal how domination can persist within dominant groups, even in the absence of formal exclusion.

Conclusion: Rethinking Minorities, Majorities, and Power in Jewish and Israeli Contexts

The historical experience of the Jewish people offers a singular and instructive lens through which to study minoritization, majority formation, and their entanglements with power, identity, and statehood. For centuries, Jews across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East lived as religious, cultural, and political minorities – subject to persecution, exclusion, and forced assimilation. This enduring status as a ‘perpetual minority’ shaped both Jewish collective memory and the nationalist movements that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Central among these was Zionism which envisioned a transformation of Jewish existence from diasporic vulnerability to territorial sovereignty and collective empowerment.

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 marked a radical reversal of historical Jewish minoritization. Through the establishment of a state, the consolidation of a Jewish demographic majority, and the exercise of sovereign control, Jews attained a form of power long denied to them in diaspora settings. Yet, as this contribution has argued, the processes of majoritization did not eliminate the dynamics of minoritization – they reconfigured them.

The formation of a Jewish majority involved mechanisms of exclusion and stratification: most notably, the displacement of Palestinians during and after the 1948 war, and the construction of legal and institutional frameworks that privileged Jewish national identity over Palestinian civic inclusion. Even among Jews, internal hierarchies persisted. Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other non-European Jewish communities often found themselves subject to forms of social and cultural

marginalization within the Ashkenazi-dominated structures of the early state. In these paradoxes, Israel became not only a response to Jewish persecution, but also a case study in how regimes of inclusion and exclusion can operate within a group's internal boundaries and across them.

The theoretical framework of minoritization has been critical in illuminating these dynamics. It allows us to move beyond numerical categories and see how legal codes, symbolic narratives, institutional power, and spatial arrangements work to include or exclude, elevate, or subordinate. Minoritization is not only a matter of being fewer in number, but a condition structured through discursive and material practices that determine who is seen as legitimate, who is granted voice, and who belongs.

Israel thus exemplifies how the move from minority to majority does not erase the moral, political, or historical dilemmas associated with marginality. On the contrary, it often translates them into new regimes of domination and vulnerability – particularly when a state's identity is built around an exclusive ethnonational ideal, as my contribution has shown. Today, Israel grapples with the enduring tension between its self-definition as a Jewish state and its democratic aspirations – a challenge made more complex by its governance over a substantial Palestinian population within and beyond its recognized borders.

At the same time, the Jewish experience also destabilizes simple binaries between oppressor and oppressed, majority and minority. In most parts of the world, Jews remain a small, often targeted minority, whose cultural presence and political safety are far from secure. Historic antisemitism periodically resurfaces, sometimes violently, while conspiracy theories recycle age-old stereotypes about Jewish influence. In Israel, by contrast, Jews constitute a national majority, bearing both the rights and the responsibilities of statehood. That duality complicates conventional frameworks – it shows that a group can simultaneously inhabit positions of power and precarity, depending on geopolitical context and historical moment.

9 Aphrahat and the Jews

An Early Church Perspective on Being a Persecuted Minority

Nathan Witkamp

Abstract

Aphrahat's *Demonstrations*, in particular his twenty-first 'On Persecution,' offers an interesting insight into the challenges of a persecuted Christian minority in fourth-century Persia. While Christians fell victim to the Great Persecution by state-supported Zoroastrian fanatics, some of the Jews – who lived in (relative) peace – may have taken advantage of this situation by attacking Christianity's truth claims and proselytizing. This explains why Aphrahat is not so much concerned with the persecutors, but with the Jews. Facing this threat of Christianity's religious competitor, Aphrahat endeavours to spiritually equip his community by arguing both the falseness of Judaism and the meaning of suffering. The unfolding of this case study further shows that external factors may catalyze a polarization between religious minorities.

Keywords: Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 21, Great Persecution, Jewish-Christian debate, identity formation, Persian Christianity

Introduction

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Christianity is the largest religious group and will probably remain so until at least the middle of the century. And although European Christianity is declining, most Europeans still consider themselves 'Christians.'¹ However, this situation may cloud the fact that things were not always this way. Christianity began as a minority religion in the Roman Empire and stayed so until well into the fourth century. It was only from that time onwards that Western Christianity became increasingly powerful and dominant, while in the East, beyond the Roman border, the church always remained a minority. The current contribution focuses on that important but often neglected branch of

1 "Christians," Pew Research Center, 2 April, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/christians/>; "Being Christian in Western Europe," Pew Research Center, 29 May 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>. Although the majority of Christians are non-practising, they still share a common Christian worldview.

Christianity, the East-Syrian or Persian Church, nowadays known as the Assyrian Church of the East.²

An important early representative of this Syriac-speaking Christianity is the fourth-century writer Aphrahat³ – also known as ‘The Persian Sage’ – who has left us 23 treatises, termed ‘Demonstrations,’ in two volumes.⁴ The second volume of Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations* was written in a period of severe Christian persecution. During this so-called ‘Great Persecution’ (see below), many Christians fell victim to the slaughter of state-supported Zoroastrian fanatics. This put Christianity as a minority within a hostile environment that endangered its existence. The situation became worse when these circumstances were exploited by the Jews to challenge Christianity’s truth claims and win (back) converts. Facing both persecution and a Jewish challenge, it is remarkable that Aphrahat appears to be more concerned about the latter. In the major part of the *Demonstrations* written during persecution, Aphrahat is debating the Jews and their practices.

The aim of the present contribution is to elucidate why Aphrahat, as a representative of a persecuted religious minority, is so worried about the challenge of Judaism, another religious minority. What made this challenge so threatening, and how did Aphrahat cope with this situation? Since this debate is particularly recorded in his *Demonstration on Persecution* (*Dem.* 21), we will focus on this writing. However, since context is of utmost importance for understanding, we turn to the historical setting of Aphrahat’s writings first.

Context: The Great Persecution

Initially, Christians enjoyed peace and tolerance in Parthian Persia.⁵ This changed gradually with the rise of the Sassanian shahs, under whose authority an alliance

2 For an introduction, see Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

3 Our knowledge about Aphrahat’s life and person is very limited. From his only extant writing, *The Demonstrations*, it is clear that he lived in Persia – possibly in the Adiabene region – and had ‘some sort of authority’ (S.P. Brock, “Aphrahat,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz, and Lucas van Rompay (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press; Beth Mardutho: The Syriac Institute, 2011), 195b–196b. We also know that he was an ascetic – an *ihidāyā* – and was involved with the proto-monastic movement of the so-called *bnay qyāmā* (sons of the covenant). But it is not certain that he was among the clerics (Peter Bruns, *Aphrahat: Demonstrationes/Unterweisungen* I, *Fontes Christiani* 5/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 41–47).

4 The work is generally apologetic in nature and is mainly directed at monks and others involved with spiritual education (Peter Bruns, *Aphrahat: Demonstrationes/Unterweisungen* I, *Fontes Christiani* 5/1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 38). The *Demonstrations* consist of two major parts, *Dem.* 1–10 and 11–22, and a concluding 23rd *Demonstration*. Based upon Aphrahat’s own remark in *Dem.* 22.25, the compilation of the two main parts can be dated exactly in 337 and 344 CE respectively; the final *Demonstration* was compiled in the summer of 345 (*Dem.* 23.69).

5 For an introduction to Syrian Christianity, see especially Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003). For the following discussion, I am particularly indebted to this work, especially pp. 106–115 and 137–147. Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Recon-*

of state and religion developed. A first symptom of this new approach to other religions manifested in the actions of Ardashir I (224–240 CE), the first shah, who destroyed some pagan temples in Armenia and stimulated the revival of the national religion of Zoroastrianism. One of his initiatives in this matter was the building of Zoroastrian fire temples. But even more important in the long term was the appointment of the so-called ‘high mobed’ or ‘high magi’ as religious advisor to the shah and high priest of the national Zoroastrian religion. These magi became very influential and were often the catalysts of later waves of persecution.⁶ Nevertheless, despite the changing tides, for about the first 100 years of the new Sassanian empire, Christians (and other minorities) still enjoyed relative peace.⁷

However, from about the year 339 or 340 CE, during the 70-year rule of Shapur II (309–379), the situation worsened dramatically and Christians in Persia fell victim to what has been termed the ‘Great Persecution.’⁸ Moffett is probably right that the cause behind this dramatic occurrence can be divided into two factors, a catalyst and a trigger.⁹ The catalyst of the persecutions was the ‘deep undercurrent of Zoroastrian fanaticism and hatred of other religions,’ helped by the developed system of the state religion.¹⁰ But the trigger was something else: the Christianization

structed Conversion, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 63–78. Syriac-speaking Christianity has long been the blind side of scholarship. Characteristic is the classical study of W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984) who spent only a handful of pages (out of about a thousand) and in a fragmentary way on Syriac Christianity. Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008) rightly filled this gap, although subsequent introductions to Christianity do not seem to have followed his lead.

- 6 Of great importance seems to have been Kartir, who was appointed mobed under Shapur I (241–272 CE), but grew to eminence after Shapur’s death (Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 109). Kartir would have been responsible for the hierarchy of the priesthood and the fighting against heathens and foreign religions.
- 7 Cf. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 108. But eventually, theory was put into practice. The first to experience oppression by the increasingly dominant state religion were the Manichaeans, resulting in the crucifixion of their leader Mani (ca. 273–276 CE) and the persecution of his followers. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 111–112 conjectures that the similarities between Manichaeism and Christianity may have contributed to the first, but short, wave of persecution of Christians under the rule of Varahran (Bahram) II (276–293 CE).
- 8 Besides Aphrahat, the most important primary sources for this event are the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Sozomen (II.9–15) and in particular the events related to Simeon Barsabae, bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, narrated in two versions, the *Martyrdom* (dated late fourth/early fifth century) and the *History* (dated late fifth century). For a discussion of the historicity of the Great Persecution, see Simcha Gross, “Being Roman in the Sassanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (Fall 2021): 361–402, especially his conclusion on page 371.
- 9 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 137–145. Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 62.
- 10 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 142.

of Rome, Persia's archenemy. As long as Christianity was the antagonist of Roman power, Persia was not only tolerant towards Christians but even became a safe haven for Christian refugees during several waves of Roman persecution.¹¹ But this attitude of tolerance (or better, indifference) gradually changed with Constantine the Great's conversion to Christianity and the Christianization of Rome.¹² These developments made Persian Christians increasingly vulnerable to falling under suspicion of allying with the enemy – the so-called 'fifth-column' accusation – particularly during periods of tensions and war between Rome and Persia.¹³

Especially for Western readers, it is important to note that the Great Persecution under Shapur II superseded all persecutions within the Roman Empire, both in scale and severity. Sozomen mentions in his *Church History* the number of 16,000 identified martyrs, besides a 'multitude ... beyond enumeration.'¹⁴ And Aphrahat himself speaks of a 'great slaughter of the martyrs.'¹⁵ The sources further indicate that this persecution affected all categories of believers, although leading figures were usually targeted first for strategic reasons. Several succeeding bishops of the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon were killed.¹⁶ As a consequence, the recent and fragile national organization of the Persian church collapsed.¹⁷ Also especially vulnerable were converted Persians. In the beginning, most new Christians were Syrians or

- 11 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 138. The persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire were mostly local but also empire-wide from the middle of the third century. Cf. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981).
- 12 Resulting in the formal decree of Thessaloniki issued on 27 February 380 that promoted (Nicene) Christianity to state religion (incorporated in *Codex Theodosianus* XVI.i.2).
- 13 Cf. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.9. What also did not help was an ill-advised letter from the Emperor Constantine to Shapur II in which he presents Christianity as the true (state) religion and hails the Persian shah for his protection of the Persian Christians (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV.8–14). That Shapur's fear of Christian disloyalty was not completely unfounded is shown by Aphrahat's 5th Demonstration in which he predicted a final victory of Rome over Persia (which did not happen). Cf. T.D. Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75 (1985): 126–136.
- 14 Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* II.14; English translation, Chester d. Hartranft, *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen, Comprising a History of the Church, from A.D. 323 to A.D. 425*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2/2, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886), 267. Sozomen's work narrates the history of the church from 324 to 440 CE and is probably written between 439 and 450 CE.
- 15 *Dem.* 23.69. Cf. Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sassanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (Fall 2021): 369–370 for the credibility and importance of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* as a witness of the persecutions.
- 16 The first to be killed was Simeon Barsabae, see n.8. The direct cause was his refusal (and inability) to pay a special tax imposed on the Christians, possibly related to Shapur II's frustration about his own inability to defeat the Christian Roman Emperor(s) (Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 66–68).
- 17 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 141.

Jews. But by the beginning of the fourth century, an increasing number of native Persians seem to have become attracted to Christianity. Probably because these Christians were seen as traitors to the national identity, the consequences for them could be harsh.¹⁸

The Jewish Challenge

Jews lived in Mesopotamia long before the first Christians arrived.¹⁹ In Aphrahat's time, large communities of Jews existed in cities such as Nisibis and Seleucia-Ctesiphon.²⁰ But unlike the Christians, Sassanian Jewry was not persecuted until the fifth century.²¹ Instead, it flourished under the early Sassanians, and Shapur II was known as a friend of the Jews.²² This means that the Jews were not persecuted during the period that Aphrahat wrote his *Demonstrations*.²³

18 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 141; cf. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.9. More recent scholarship shows a revisionist trend which nuances the scope, duration, and seriousness of the persecution under Shapur II. A key element of the revisionist approach is to deny the fifth-column dynamics. See, however, the excellent refutation of the revisionist methodology by Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sassanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (Fall 2021), who shows that the fifth column anxiety (particularly in border areas) still provides the best explanation of violence against Christians and states that the "sources attest more victims of Sassanian violence than the revisionist scholars appear to allow, though not necessarily the masses of the traditional perspective" (372).

19 At least from the fourth century BCE, see Sara E. Karesh and Mitchell M. Hurvitz, *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 387; cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 51–52.

20 Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 60. Communities also existed in cities like Sura, Pumpedita, Mohoza (Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 56), Nehardea, Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana), and Susa (Sara E. Karesh and Mitchell M. Hurvitz, *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Facts on File, 2006), 387). Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70–1492* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 17 estimate that in the year 300 there were roughly 1 million Persian Jews on a total population of about 9 million.

21 The one exception concerns the slaughter of Jews who headed for Jerusalem in order to rebuild the temple during the reign of the Roman emperor Julian (*Apostata*). Cf. Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sassanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (Fall 2021): 398–399.

22 Alisa Douer, *The Jews of Iraq*, Arabische Welt-Arab World, Vol. 4, ed. Rüdiger Lohlker (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2017), 40.

23 Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 23; Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 108, 141. The fifth-column dynamics also explain why the Jews were not or less persecuted, see Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sassanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution of Christians under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (Fall 2021): 382, 397–401.

The contrast between the situation of the Jews and the Christians in the mid-fourth century Sassanian Empire forms an important background for understanding the second part of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* in general and his demonstration *On Persecution* in particular, which he begins with the following *problema*:

I have heard a shameful thing and it greatly grieved me, because the unclean say that, 'This people who is gathered from all the Nations has no God.' And the wicked say thus, 'If there is a God for them why does he not require vengeance for his people?' Darkness grew more thick upon me when the Jews also reproach us and magnify themselves over the children of our people. It happened one day that a man who is called 'the sage of the Jews' asked me, saying, 'Jesus who was called your teacher wrote for you, "If there shall be faith in you like a single grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, Move, and it will move away from before you, and even be lifted up and fall into the sea, for it shall obey you"' (Matt. 17:20; 21:22). Thus there is in all your people not one wise man whose prayer is heard, (who) asks of God that your persecutions should cease from you. For it is written thus for you in a text "That there is nothing which you shall not be able to do"' (Matt. 17:20).²⁴

Aphrahat tells us here that the persecution of the Christians evoked negative reactions from the unclean/wicked and the Jews, which challenged the credibility of their faith.²⁵ It is the accusations of the Jews, however, that bother him most and not without reason: Judaism was the strongest competitor to Christianity at that time.²⁶ Since both religions had important similarities in beliefs and practice, but were at the same time distinctive and mutually exclusive – especially in their perception of Jesus of Nazareth – apologetics must have played an important role in their relationship and the battle for converts.²⁷ Basic issues of debate probably concerned the

24 Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 21.1; D. Ioannes Parisot, *Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, ed. R. Graffin (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Socii, 1894), 932–933; English translation, Kuriakose Valavanolickal, *Aphrahat Demonstrations II*, Mōrān 'Eth'ō Series 24 (Kottayam/Kerala, India: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2005), 201.

25 The 'unclean' (*jamm'ē*) and the 'wicked' (*'awwālē*) are probably non-Jewish unbelievers.

26 Gerard Rouwhorst, "Initiation by Circumcision and Water Baptism in Early Judaism and Early Christianity," in *Ritual Dynamics in Jewish and Christian Contexts: Between Bible and Liturgy*, ed. Claudia D. Bergmann and Benedikt Kranemann (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 185; Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 4; Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 44. More particularly, Koltun-Fromm defends the thesis of an 'on-going Jewish-Christian dispute in fourth-century Persia as understood by the Babylonian Jewish community' based on her reading of Aphrahat (31).

27 Given the circumstances and the nature of our sources, it is more than likely that Aphrahat's anti-Jewish polemics are not just a literary construct or the Jew a literary fiction. Aphrahat speaks of his encounters with Jews as the very reason for writing his *Demonstrations* (11.1, 17.12, and 18.12). See on this especially Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century*

right understanding of the Jewish Bible, the truth of core beliefs, the effectiveness of (initiation) rituals, and the right ethical praxis.²⁸ This all constituted the identity of both religions.

According to the Jewish sage in the opening of Aphrahat's *Demonstration* above, the current persecution showed the spiritual weakness (and so the falseness) of the Christian faith. It is unlikely, however, that Aphrahat himself was impressed by the argument. However, against the background of the ongoing debate with Judaism in general and in the face of the persecutions in particular, these accusations had to be dealt with. After all, at stake were the credibility and identity of Christianity. And this was not just a theoretical matter; Jews may have exploited this situation to polemicize against their competitor and win (back) converts.²⁹ Indeed, at several places throughout his *Demonstrations*, Aphrahat mentions that the Jews were proselytizing among Christians.³⁰ Christians who, under the circumstances of persecution may have considered a conversion (back) to Judaism, would have been vulnerable to arguments that challenged the believability of Christianity.³¹ This would have been particularly true for Jewish Christians, who probably still

Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 15–16, 19, 20, 23–28, 32, who argues that the Jewish arguments 'as recorded in the *Demonstrations*, resonate substantially with what we know from rabbinic scriptural interpretations and talmudic understandings of fourth-century Jewish existence' (51).

- 28 In this process, both parties borrowed ideas and rituals from each other in order to stay competitive. Concerning the initiation rituals, see Nathan Witkamp, "Circumcision and Baptism? Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* as a Window to Jewish Initiation in Persia," in *Let God be True: Perspectives on Romans 3*, Gorgias Biblical Studies 73, ed. Jacobus (Kobus) Kok, Jermo van Nes, and Jeremy D. Otten (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2023), 323–346.
- 29 Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 23, 50; Jacob Neusner, "Babylonian Jewry and Shapur II's Persecution of Christianity from 339 to 379 A.D.," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 43 (1972): 77–102 (79); Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 42. The polemics probably began in the cities (Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 50). The Jews were probably not actively involved in the persecutions. See Neusner, "Babylonian Jewry"; Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 73–74.
- 30 E.g., *Dem.* 18.1: 'For ... the Jewish people ... change and weaken the minds of those simple and ordinary people who are attracted and captivated by their upsetting argument' (*Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 817; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 153). Cf. *Dem.* 15.8; 17.12; 18.12; 19.12. Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 28, 48.
- 31 Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 16, 38, 45–78. Cf. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 128.

constituted a significant part of Aphrahat's community at that time.³² But it is also understandable that other Christians might have been pushed over the threshold by the circumstances too. Anyhow, if Christians were tempted to leave the church, they most likely chose Judaism over Zoroastrianism. Not only because the persecutions were ignited by the latter, but also because Judaism seemed a much better choice if one wanted to safeguard one's family *and* one's basic religious worldview and practice at the same time. This all implies, of course, that Jews and Christians must have had significant interaction with each other and that becoming a religious Jew was a serious and practically feasible option.³³ Yet, even when the 'conversion' was only pragmatically motivated and one just saw the synagogue as a temporary shelter during times of persecution, Aphrahat's concern is still understandable, since the outflow of church members would have had a negative impact on the vitality of a community under pressure.

This all clarifies why Aphrahat was so upset with the Jewish accusation; it created a two-front threat to the survival of Christianity with the persecutions on the one side and the Jewish competition for converts on the other. And fundamental to this all was the question of how a vital Christian identity could cope with both challenges. In order to avoid an identity crisis, Christianity had to argue its truth over against Judaism and to make sense of suffering.

First Response: Christianity Surpasses Judaism

The first response which Aphrahat makes to the Jewish challenge in his *Demonstration on Persecution* is to argue the truth of Christianity over against that of Judaism. In fact, this is the main concern in Aphrahat's second volume and several facets of this issue are dealt with in succeeding demonstrations.³⁴ Most, if not all, of these treatises are apologetic responses to Jewish accusations.

32 One must not forget that Persian Christianity 'took root in the Jewries of Edessa and Adiabene' (Jacob Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 2) and that the Christian community 'included large numbers of converted Jews' (4). Cf. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), who conjectures that 'about the time of the conversion of Aphrahat, Jewish Christians probably still outnumbered Gentiles in the church of Adiabene' (128).

33 Cf. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), and in particular the contributions of Adam H. Becker, "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes: Questioning the 'Parting of the Ways' Outside the Roman Empire," 373–392, and Naomi Koltun-Fromm, "Zipporah's Complaint: Moses is not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses' Celibacy," 283–306.

34 These are *On Circumcision* (11); *On Passover* (12); *On Sabbath* (13); *On the Distinction between Foods* (15); *On the Peoples which have taken the Place of the People* (16); *On the Messiah who is the Son of God* (17); *Against the Jews on Virginity and Continence* (18); *Against the Jews on account of their Saying that it is certain for them to be gathered Together* (19); *On Persecution* (21); and parts of *On the Cluster of Grapes* (23).

Although the discussion also relates to practical issues like circumcision, food laws, and virginity, the most basic question is, ‘Which people are the rightful heir of the biblical Israel: the church or the Jews?’³⁵ The answer to this question determines in which religious community the correct interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures is to be found. This concerns the well-known hermeneutical circle: one’s theological framework shapes one’s interpretation of the biblical text, which in turn informs one’s theological framework and so on. Aphrahat himself is very much aware of this hermeneutical complexity as becomes clear from his primary response to the Jewish sage’s accusation with reference to Matt. 17:20 (cf. 21:21–22; see quotation above), ‘When I saw that he was blaspheming and speaking much against the way (Act. 9:2; 18:25), my mind was troubled *and I knew that he would not accept the interpretation of the words which he was quoting to me.*’³⁶ This clash of paradigms is further illustrated by the similar challenge with which Aphrahat confronts his Jewish opponent:

For Isaiah the prophet had said to Israel as from the mouth of his God, ‘If you pass through the sea I am with you, and the rivers shall not overflow you. If you walk over fire, you shall not be scorched, and the flame shall not burn you, for the Lord your God is with you’ (Isa. 43:2-3). Thus there is not a single man righteous, good and wise among your whole people, who may pass through the sea and live, without being drowned, on the river without it sweeping him away. Let him walk over fire and see if he would not be scorched and if the flame would not burn him. *And if you bring me an explanation, I will not be persuaded by you, as you also do not accept from me the explanation of the words that you have demanded from me.*³⁷

The final sentence of the above passage is fundamental and clarifies that Aphrahat’s aim is neither to convince his Jewish opponent nor to provide his readers arguments for doing so. Instead – in line with the nature of Christian apologetics in general – his endeavour is primarily to help his community cope with Jewish allegations. The apology is meant to confirm and strengthen the faith of insiders and in particular that of those who have a weaker faith. In other words, Aphrahat is pastorally focused by nourishing and shaping a vital Christian identity.

Now the cards are on the table, Aphrahat arrives at the central issue: is there hope for the Jews *as a people*? If not, one may read between the lines, then the church is the rightful heir of the biblical Israel. The first part of his argumentation continues the debate with the Jewish sage and centres around the meaning of several verses

35 This issue is also dealt with in *Demonstration 16, On the Peoples which have taken the Place of the People*.

36 *Dem. 21.2; Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, 933; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 201. Italics mine.

37 *Dem. 21.2; Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, 933, 936; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 202. Italics mine.

of Ezekiel 16.³⁸ Aphrahat opens this phase by asking his opponent to explain the meaning of Ezek. 16:55, 'Sodom and her daughters shall be built up as of old, and you and your daughters will become as of old.' The Jewish sage elucidates that this means that Jerusalem and her daughters will be restored in their splendour and that Sodom and her daughters shall be made subject to Israel. Then Aphrahat gives his own interpretation of the passage. He argues that, since the whole context of Ezekiel 16 is negative about Israel and the close context in particular (Ezek. 16:48, 52), the verses under discussion also must have a negative meaning. He concludes that the passage means that, in the end, Sodom shall be built up as of old and that Jerusalem, whose sins exceeded those of Sodom, shall remain in desolation. For, so he argues, if Sodom has been in desolation for such a long time (he counts more than 2,000 years), and the sins of Jerusalem surpassed those of Sodom, would she not remain uninhabited forever?³⁹ This thesis is further elaborated in the second part of his argumentation when Aphrahat turns directly to the reader.⁴⁰

It is clear then for Aphrahat that there is no future for the Jews as a people. This means by implication – and further argued elsewhere⁴¹ – that the church has taken its place and is the rightful heir of ancient Israel. In consequence, the church is the true community, in which the true belief and the true explanation of the Scriptures is to be found.

Second Response: Suffering Has Meaning

In the second part of *On Persecution*, Aphrahat deals with a Jewish accusation that says, 'You are persecuted and you are not delivered.'⁴² It is not clear whether this concerns a separate accusation or is Aphrahat's rephrase of a charge implied in the more elaborate accusation quoted above. In any case, after his endeavour to defend the credibility of Christianity by arguing that Judaism is no viable alternative, the focus shifts to the persecution itself. How may Aphrahat cope with this challenge?

He first discusses the peculiarity of the accusation: the Jews themselves were persecuted several times, and even for longer periods, 'until they were delivered.'⁴³ He substantiates this claim with different examples from the Hebrew Bible that describe Israel's oppression followed by God's deliverance. The point that Aphrahat wants to make is probably that God may deliver his people even if it takes longer than expected. Moreover, Aphrahat adds, these persecutions were not meaningless. In fact, they were caused by God himself in order to chastise his people.⁴⁴ But in the case of the Jews, this did not have the desired effect; the Jews were stubborn and changed the worship of the one true God for that of idols (cf. Jer. 2:10–13, 30).

38 *Dem.* 21.3–4.

39 A critical analysis of Aphrahat's exegesis falls beyond the aim of the present contribution.

40 *Dem.* 21.5–6.

41 See especially *Dem.* 16.

42 *Dem.* 21.7; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 949; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 207.

43 *Dem.* 21.7; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 949; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 207.

44 An aspect which Aphrahat takes up elsewhere concerning Christian persecution, see below.

After having shared his general concerns about the Jewish accusation, Aphrahat develops his main apology: persecution belongs to the identity of Christianity since Jesus himself was persecuted. To elucidate this, he first compiles an extensive list of the Old Testament righteous who anticipated and paralleled Jesus in their suffering.⁴⁵ In each case, Aphrahat draws several parallels between the Old Testament figure and Jesus. For example, he notes that

David too was persecuted, and Jesus was persecuted.

David was anointed by Samuel to be king in the place of Saul who had sinned (1 Sam. 16:1–13).

Jesus was anointed by John to be the high priest in the place of the priests (who) had transgressed the Law.

David was persecuted after his anointing.

Jesus was persecuted after his anointing.⁴⁶

It is Aphrahat's hope that these ancient witnesses may comfort those who are persecuted in his day 'on account of Jesus who was persecuted.'⁴⁷ To further substantiate this, he quotes a conflation of John 15:19–20 and 17:14, 'If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you. Therefore, they will persecute you, for you are not of (this) world, just as I am not from it.'⁴⁸

Next, Aphrahat presents a somewhat longer conflation of sayings of Jesus, which testify that the followers of Jesus should not despair when they are arrested and handed over to the authorities, for the Holy Spirit will speak in and through them (Matt. 5:19–20; Lk. 11:11; 12:11; 21:14–15).⁴⁹ This divine help is further illustrated by another, but shorter, list of testimonies of Old Testament saints like Jacob, Joseph, and David, who experienced the assistance of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰

After having emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit concerning the Christian life in general and the experience of suffering in particular, Aphrahat develops another list in chronological order, of martyrs, confessors, and the persecuted.⁵¹ This list contains several figures from the Old Testament and the intertestamental period, supplemented with the witness of the apostolic and post-apostolic era. Yet, however impressive and encouraging these witnesses may be, Aphrahat

45 *Dem.* 21.8–20.

46 *Dem.* 21.13; *Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, 964; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 215.

47 *Dem.* 21.21; *Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, 981; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 226.

48 *Dem.* 21.21; *Patrologia Syriaca I.1*, 981; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 226.

49 *Dem.* 21.21.

50 Although Aphrahat does not say so explicitly, Adam Lehto, "Making Sense of Persecution in Aphrahat's Demonstrations," *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012): 34–42 (37) may be right that this mention of the Holy Spirit has not just pastoral but also apologetic value, viz. that the reality of the Spirit's activity in the churches proves that Christianity is the true heir of the biblical Israel.

51 *Dem.* 21.22–23.

affirms that there is One who exceeds them all: Jesus himself. He stands at the centre of all those who were persecuted and ‘exceeded in affliction and in confession all who were before and after (him).’⁵²

Nevertheless, it is not without reason that Aphrahat concludes his final list with the mention of the persecution of the church in the West ‘in the days of Diocletian’ during which ‘Churches were overthrown and were uprooted.’⁵³ Pivotal for Aphrahat’s argument here is that ‘many confessors and martyrs made the confession,’ and especially that God ‘returned to them in mercy after they were persecuted.’⁵⁴ This witness counters the Jewish claim that they are persecuted but not delivered and therefore comforts his own suffering community with hope of deliverance.

This could have brought his argument to a close. But remarkably, Aphrahat adds the following comment:

These things have occurred also in our days, truly on account of our sins; but also because what is written is being fulfilled; as our Saviour has said, ‘These things are going to happen’ (Matt. 24:6; Lk. 21:9). The Apostle too has said, ‘Also over us is placed this cloud of confession’ (Heb. 12:1) of the One we honour, under which many will confess and be killed.’⁵⁵

The biblical predictions confirm Aphrahat’s general argument that the current Christian suffering is in line with the long history of persecution of the saints and falls under divine providence. But the former remark is most intriguing: the persecution is also ascribed to the sins of the church. This mention is not only unexpected, but also puts under tension his earlier apology.⁵⁶ For this reason, it is understandable that Aphrahat leaves this point to rest for now, only to take it up in *Demonstration* 23, considering the problem of unheard prayers.⁵⁷

Concluding Remarks

The above discussion of Aphrahat’s *Demonstration on Persecution* shows his two-fold strategy to cope with the Jewish challenge: (1) he argues the truth of and the

52 *Dem.* 21.23; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 988; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 228–229.

53 *Dem.* 21.23; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 988–989; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 229.

54 *Dem.* 21.23; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 989; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 229.

55 *Dem.* 21.23; *Patrologia Syriaca* I.1, 989; English translation, Valavanolickal, *Demonstrations II*, 229.

56 Cf. Adam Lehto, “Making Sense of Persecution in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012): 37.

57 In *Demonstration* 23, Aphrahat argues that the church’s unheard prayers – and thus the persecution – are a consequence of its negligence of the responsibility to mediate God’s salvation to the world. For a meaningful discussion of this topic, see Adam Lehto, “Making Sense of Persecution in Aphrahat’s *Demonstrations*,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012): 38–41.

right to exist of Christianity against Judaism, and (2) he argues the meaning of the current experience of suffering. Both enhance the Christian identity. A few concluding remarks are appropriate here to evaluate Aphrahat's approach within its particular context.

Aphrahat perceived Judaism as a serious threat to the survival of Christianity under persecution. To deal with this situation, Aphrahat takes an offensive apologetics approach by attacking the truth claims of Judaism. However, this apologetics is not an end in itself; Aphrahat is not just combating Judaism for its own sake. His primary concern is the spiritual well-being and vitality of his congregation. By arguing the truth of Christianity against Judaism, he hopes to equip the believer to resist the pressure to leave the church for the synagogue, in particular combined with a meaningful interpretation of suffering. Both arguments strengthen each other: if suffering, however hard it may be, shapes the Christian identity, there is no reason to forsake the church because of it, especially if the alternative is no alternative at all.

It is obvious that Aphrahat is not the first who was engaged in an argument with Judaism. In fact, this debate is as old as the beginnings of the church as recorded in the New Testament.⁵⁸ From the second century onwards, the *adversus Judaeos* becomes a common genre. Particularly relevant for the present purpose, however, is that Aphrahat distinguishes himself from many others (before and after him) by his tone. Aphrahat nowhere uses *ad hominem* arguments against the Jews. Nor does he employ hyperbolic language to create the image of a holy church and a sinful synagogue. This is clearly shown by his concluding remark that the persecution is partially caused by the church's own sins (*nota bene!*) – further developed in *Demonstration* 23. Christians are not better people than Jews; the only, but crucial, difference is that they follow Jesus, the suffering Messiah.

Nevertheless, this is exactly the issue for Aphrahat: Judaism and Christianity are mutually exclusive religions, and both are shaping their identity by creating borders between each other.⁵⁹ There is no in-between. We see, then, that Aphrahat's situation forms an interesting case of polarization between similar religious minorities, catalyzed by external factors.⁶⁰ Rival religious groups may live alongside each other for many years, but if the circumstances favour the other, the competitors may switch to survival mode. In order to endure the times, one's own identity

58 Not a few New Testament passages argue that Judaism without Jesus the Messiah is incomplete. Cf. John 8:42–59; Romans 10; 2 Cor. 3:14–18; the Epistle to the Hebrews, etc.

59 Cf. Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Jewish-Christian Conversation in Fourth-Century Persian Mesopotamia: A Reconstructed Conversion*, Judaism in Context 12 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 17, 19, 63.

60 As Adam H. Becker, "Beyond the Spatial and Temporal Limes," in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 373–392, rightly remarks with reference to Jewish-Christian relationships in Sassanian Mesopotamia, that 'significantly, the most important literary witness to Christianity in fourth-century Sassanian Mesopotamia, Aphrahat, the so-called Persian Sage, only begins to attack Judaism once the persecution under Shapur II begins' (376).

has to be reinforced at the expense of the other's. And this all in the hope that insiders may remain confirmed of the truth of their faith and that outsiders may become persuaded by it. In Aphrahat's age and region, this concerned a battle with words; there are no indications that Jews and Christians employed physical violence against each other, nor that one party had the power to suppress the other. Things would develop differently in both East and West, but that is another story.

10 Arab Christians

A Peculiar Minority Paradigm

Elias El Halabi

Abstract

Christians were a majority in the East at the dawn of Islam, but later became a religious minority under the custody of a Muslim majority. They soon adopted Arabic, the language of the Qur'ān, as their theological and liturgical language. Their contributions to Arabic culture were tangible outcomes of this rich encounter. Moreover, this attitude of cooperation influenced the political choices of the Christians, and the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch in particular, in being directed towards solidarity and partnership with the Muslims. Such developments are atypical of minority behaviours and are conducive to inclusiveness and active participation. This contribution traces the dynamics of the relationship between Eastern Arab Christianity and Islam as a peculiar minority paradigm.

Keywords: Arab Christians, minorities, acculturation, symbiosis

Introduction

[T]he fact of being once an Arab and a Christian puts one in a very special situation: it makes you a member of a minority – a situation not easy to accept. It marks a person deeply and permanently. I cannot deny that it has played a decisive part in most of the decisions I have had to make in the course of my own life, including the decision to write this book.¹

The West generally equates Arabs with Muslims. Nevertheless, there are Christians in the Arab world. In fact, there were Arabs who witnessed the dawn of the Christian Church at Pentecost and were referred to in the Acts of the Apostles (2:11). The term 'Arab Christians' in this contribution refers to the Eastern and Oriental Churches who were present in the East at the incoming of Islam and have

1 Amine Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the need to Belong* (New York: Arcade, 2001), 17.

been interacting with it over the course of history. However, their numbers are continually decreasing and they are ‘perhaps also a diminishing minority.’² Rather than providing a historical chronology of Arab Christianity, this contribution places emphasis on the major historical landmarks that have marked the evolution of the Arab Christian identity in its encounter with Islam. It analyzes the dynamics and impact of these cross-cultural interactions on the self-awareness of the Arab Christians in the East, their contribution to Arab culture and their evolution as a religious minority. ‘Arabia may be where Islam began, but the cultures and traditions of other areas, most notably the more populated regions of the Near East from Egypt to Iran, arguably played a more critical role in the subsequent delimitation of Islamic Identity.’³ After initially being the majority, the Christians in the East became a minority following the rise of Islam for a variety of reasons, including the dhimmi status. However, this contribution argues that Arab Christians have never been minoritized, but they had an influence on Islam and contributed to shaping Arab culture, just as Islam in return had an influence on Arab Christianity in the East. In parallel, being a small Christian group under the rule of Islam did not diminish their role and impact at the broader Christian level. Special focus is given to the Orthodox Church of Antioch whose future political choices and even religious developments were a reflection of this self-awareness.

There are different aspects to the term religious minority and in its discussion, this contribution adopts the definition developed by E. Capotorti,⁴ special rapporteur of the United Nations’ sub-commission on the prevention of discrimination and protection of minorities. Capotorti states, a minority is ‘a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.’⁵ This definition also has its own limitations since the evolution of Arab Christianity did not seek preservation only but rather was open to other forms of intercultural processes in which the Arabic language provides an underlying grid. However, Capotorti aptly captures the main characteristics that delineate Arab Christian groups living in Muslim majority situations.

Arab Christianity

The word ‘Arab’ does not refer to an ethnicity but to a culture, as in the hadith of the prophet of Islam: ‘being Arab is not a matter of lineage but of a language:

2 Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 1.

3 Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39.

4 For further reading on minorities refer to Francesco Capotorti, *Study on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* (New York: United Nations, 1979).

5 “Minorities,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicolas Lossky, Jose Miguez Bonino, John Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb, 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 779.

whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab.⁶ There were Arabs and Christian Arabs before Islam. Moreover, Taha Hussein (1889–1973), nicknamed the dean of Arabic literature, acknowledged that Arabic is not for Muslims alone but for all who speak this language. He expressed his pride in the Arab Christians as much as in his Arabism.⁷ Likewise, he comments that Christians have to stop fearing being called Arabs and express their pride in their role in the Arabic cultural heritage.⁸

In the fourth and fifth centuries, Christians were debating theological and Christological issues and were split dogmatically between Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians, and culturally as Copts, Syriacs, Rum (Greeks), and Armenians. Political, historical, cultural, and philosophical issues provided the underlying grid of this Christian mosaic. In fact, the cultural element played an important role in the elaboration of local theological discourses in native languages other than Greek, which used to be the common theological language in the East. With the Arab conquests, Christians in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt joined the other Arab Christians, and the Arabic language replaced Greek as a common language of interaction between all Christians in the East.⁹ ‘Christian Arab culture is simply the Christian way of life in the Islamic milieu, the result of the enculturation of Christians in the social fabric of Islam.’¹⁰

The Arab Christians are those who lived in the land of Islam (Dār al Islām) and had Arabic as their mother tongue. This includes the native Arabs like the Ghassanids and Manazhira,¹¹ who were Arabs before Islam, and those who Arabized over the course of the centuries.¹² They were the Aramaics who used to speak Syriac in the countryside and Greek in the cities. They gradually Arabized

6 Hadith: Saying of Mohammad approved by Ibn Asakir. Quoted in Fr. Samir Khalil, “The Role of the Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and Syria (750–1050),” in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr, Souad Abou el Rouss Slim, and Joseph Abou Nehra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 496.

7 Samir Khalil, “Al-Turāth Al-‘Arabi Al-Masihi,” *Islamochristiana, Pontificio Istituto Di Studi Arabi E Islamici* 8 (1982): 1–35 (29), Editor in chief Robert Caspar, Monastir (Tunisia) PISAI, editorial board PISAI community.

8 Samir Khalil, “Al-Turāth Al-‘Arabi Al-Masihi,” *Islamochristiana, Pontificio Istituto Di Studi Arabi E Islamici* 8 (1982): 31.

9 Samir Khalil, “Al-Turāth Al-‘Arabi Al-Masihi,” *Islamochristiana, Pontificio Istituto Di Studi Arabi E Islamici* 8 (1982): 26.

10 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 225–242 (231).

11 The Ghassanids (or Banū Ghassān) and the Manādhira (or Banū Manzūr) were two prominent pre-Islamic Arab dynasties. Initially pagan, they later converted to Christianity and played significant roles in spreading Christianity among Arab tribes in addition to their political and military roles in the late antique Near East. See also Irfan Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), and C.E. Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs Before Islam,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1), ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

12 Georges Khodr, “Al-Masihiyyun Al-‘Arab,” *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 5.

and were mostly bilingual until the sixteenth or seventeenth century.¹³ The three centuries prior to the rise of Islam in 630 CE formed the golden period of Arab Christianity. 'It was in this period that most of the Christian Arabs have converted, and became themselves, directly or indirectly, agents of spreading the Christian faith in the Near East.'¹⁴ The rise of Islam and Arab conquests marked the opening of a new chapter in the history of Arab Christianity.¹⁵

At the dawn of Islam, Christians and Christian churches were found in the Arabian Peninsula from the northern borders of the current Saudi Arabia to Najran in Yemen at the southern borders.¹⁶ Nazarens (Q 5:15 and 82) were the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Qur'ān's audience.¹⁷ The Arab-Islamic conquests started in Arabia first and reached the Near East, then the Levant, and finally Egypt by 641 CE.¹⁸ The Christians constituted 75% of the Levant until the end of the Crusades. This might be due to the tolerance Islam had towards the Christians.¹⁹ In Islam, the verse 'No Compulsion in religion' (Q 2:256) and 'Do not contend with people of the Book except in the fairest way' (Q 29:46) may provide a strong justification for this historical fact.

The Christians were considered as dhimmis, 'under the covenant of protection,' thus indicating a lack of equality with the Muslims who had to protect them during times of war. The 'Covenant of Omar' provided the provisions that governed the lives of these Christian communities under Islamic rule in conformity with the Qur'ānic dictum of the 'People of the Book,' especially pertaining to paying Al-Jizya, the poll tax, along with submissive conduct.²⁰ The Covenant can be seen as the legal interpretation of the verse from the Qur'ān:

Fight those who do not believe in Allah or in the Last Day and who do not consider unlawful what Allah and His Messenger have made unlawful and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture – [fight] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled.
(Q 9:29)

13 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 6.

14 Irfan Shahid, "Arab Christianity Before the Rise of Islam," in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 219–234 (435).

15 Irfan Shahid, "Arab Christianity Before the Rise of Islam," in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 448.

16 Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 2.

17 Sidney H. Griffith, "The Eastern Christians and the Muslims," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 227. Nazarens is the general name given in the Qur'ān to describe all the Christian denominations at the time of the advent of Islam.

18 Fr. Samir Khalil, "The Role of the Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and Syria (750–1050)," in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr, Souad Abou el Rouss Slim, and Joseph Abou Nehra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 497.

19 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 10.

20 Sidney H. Griffith, "The Eastern Christians and the Muslims," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 228.

In addition to protection, Christians enjoyed the tolerance of Islam towards them organizing their internal communal affairs but on the other hand, they suffered restrictions not so much on their beliefs but on their behaviour in public.²¹ 'The payment of the *jizya* became, for ordinary *dhimmis*, a considerable burden, both psychologically and as a simple matter of payment.'²² Nevertheless, *dhimma* issues, due to the lack of unified and sufficient scientific evidence, remain a thorny and sensitive issue for Christians and Muslims alike.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the Christians too became the carriers of the torch of Greek culture. They opened the door for the Muslims (monolingual so far) to receive the fruits of Greek wisdom in translating books on philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and others. As a result of their vibrant and positive contribution to the Islamic cultural renaissance in the Abbasid period, the Christians gained some cultural superiority.²³ The famous Nestorian Hunain bin Ishac and his son Ishac were rewarded in gold for their translation work. Consequently, this aroused both appreciation and envy on the part of the Muslims.²⁴ Yet occupying high ranks in the Abbasid government structures did not erase the restrictions imposed on the Christians, with all the bitterness entailed in the *dhimmi* status. It can be inferred that Christians enjoyed freedom of action within Abbasid society, but it did not amount to full-fledged citizenship.²⁵ These friendly relationships, especially in high places, generated feelings of resentment in both communities. 'Many Christians complained of persecution and ill-treatment, while many Muslims were displeased with the freedom of speech enjoyed by non-Muslims.'²⁶ Over the course of three centuries after the Abbasid rule,²⁷ the non-Muslims were reduced to a minority status with the enforcement of the Islamic laws governing their relationship with Muslims, and the institutionalization of 'the political and

21 According to the terms of the so-called 'Pact of 'Umar' and the various other legal texts which expand upon the status of the *dhimmis* according to Muslim law, non-Muslims were required to wear clothing of a certain colour, to humiliate them and make their identification easier – a goal made more important, perhaps, in a world without ghettoization. On the whole, such restrictions were not terribly onerous. In some cases, however, the restrictions seriously circumscribed the *dhimmis'* religious lives. Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 161.

22 Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162.

23 Fr. Samir Khalil, "The Role of the Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and Syria (750–1050)," in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr, Souad Abou el Rouss Slim, and Joseph Abou Nehra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 487.

24 David Thomas, *Al-Masihyya Al-'Arabiyya*, ed. and trans. Wagheeh Yussef (Cairo: Markaz Dirasāt Masihiyyat Al- Sharq Al-Awsat, 2014), 36.

25 David Thomas, *Al-Masihyya Al-'Arabiyya*, ed. and trans. Wagheeh Yussef (Cairo: Markaz Dirasāt Masihiyyat Al- Sharq Al-Awsat, 2014), 37.

26 Sidney H. Griffith, "The Eastern Christians and the Muslims," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 234.

27 The Islamic world after the Abbasids was ruled by decentralized but powerful dynasties including the Ayyubid (1127–1260). The Mamluks ruled from the last Ayyubid sultan till the Ottoman conquests of Syria in 1516 and of Egypt in 1517.

social inferiority of the former, took on a normative shape.²⁸ The Mamluk rulers were much more conservative than the Ayyubid in ‘upholding the legal position of the churches and their hierarchies.’²⁹ Frequent targeting of Christians and churches by angry Muslims as a result of economic recession and famine gave an excuse to many Mamluk rulers to issue edicts to implement the Covenant of Omar.³⁰ In 1354, the Mamluk rulers actively supported the destruction of churches in Egypt and confiscating church properties, which resulted in a ‘sharp increase in conversion of Christian middle and Upper Class to Islam.’³¹

This is reflective of a reversal of the superiority/inferiority cultural relationship in favour of the Muslim side who now fully adopted the attitude of a ruling class. It is not possible to say that the dhimmi system was a system under which the Christians lived well, as there have been several periods in which the dhimmis were subjected to abuse.³² Some scholars believe that the Crusades decreased the feeling of security enjoyed by the Christians under the dhimmi status because they were often identified with ‘the aggressor.’³³ Nevertheless, the dhimmi communities did not surrender easily to the new dominant Muslim culture and in many instances they responded robustly.³⁴ The nature of the relationship between the Christians and the Muslim rulers was based initially on the principle of interest or need related to challenges imposed by life and political and economic realities. It becomes a destructive experience for the Christians whenever this interest or need is lacking, or whenever dangers are threatening the Ummah like those posed by the Crusaders or others such as western colonizers who are considered to be Christians.³⁵

The millet system was the Ottoman’s way of managing their diverse empire. The millet system was an Ottoman adaptation of the dhimmi status of the non-Muslims in the empire. In 1839, during the reform period known also as the *Tanzimāt*, the Royal decree the *Khaṭṭi Sharīf* of *Gülkhāne* declared equality before the law for all the citizens of the Ottoman Empire regardless of their religion.³⁶ This decree and the *Khaṭṭi Hamayūn*, issued on 18 February 1856, constituted the charter that governed the legal personal status of the non-Muslim citizens in the Ottoman Empire,

28 Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

29 Yorgen Nielson, “Christians Under the Mamluks,” in *Christianity a History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 597–604 (600).

30 Yorgen Nielson, “Christians Under the Mamluks,” in *Christianity a History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 602.

31 Yorgen Nielson, “Christians Under the Mamluks,” in *Christianity a History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 603.

32 Radwan El-Sayed, “Islamic Thought and Religious Freedom,” *Ijtihad* 30 (1996): 37–52 (38).

33 Yorgen Nielson, “Christians Under the Mamluks,” in *Christianity a History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr et al. (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 602.

34 Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 159.

35 Radwan El-Sayed, “Islamic Thought and Religious Freedom,” *Ijtihad* 30 (1996): 44.

36 Safiye Sa’ade, “Nizām Al-Millāh wal-Saltāna Al-’Othmaniyya,” *Fikr*, August–October 1984, 159–172 (166).

mainly the Christians and the Jews.³⁷ Nevertheless, these reforms were doomed to failure because the military and the government officials from one side and the European countries from the other side rejected them.³⁸

In the post-Ottoman millet system, the Arab Christians did not perceive themselves as a political entity separate from the Muslim community either at the level of social dealings or intellectual endeavour. The Christians identified themselves with the Islamic civilization while retaining their dogmas, their family traditions, and their particular crafts.³⁹ For the Orthodox Church of Antioch in particular, national allegiance has superseded any other ethnic concerns. The Orthodox have always advocated for schemes of coexistence with their Muslim compatriots, even within the Ottoman Empire. In 1909, Patriarch Gregorios IV (Haddad) welcomed the new Ottoman decree enabling Christians to join the Ottoman army as a sign of unity and nationalism within the Ottoman collegiality. Later, Patriarch Haddad affirmed his allegiance to King Faysal even after his defeat before the French army which occupied Syria and Lebanon, and came at midnight to bid farewell to the king before he left the country.⁴⁰ Moreover, at the peak of controversy around the issue of being a minority, a French official, in 1936, complained that the Orthodox Patriarch Alexandros III (Tahan) of Antioch had said that he 'didn't understand all the noise being made over the question of minorities; we are all Arabs and we don't need any special protection except that of the common laws in an Arab country.'⁴¹ Patriarch Tahan was an atypical Christian clergyman because all others preferred the status of minority, with all the political influence and financial benefits entailed in being under the protection and support of an external western power, namely France (which strived to present itself not as an occupying power but as the protector of minorities), even at the risk of being excluded from the majority in the formation of the newly established Syria under the French mandate.⁴² This explains why the French mandate officials labelled the Orthodox as 'cousins of Islam.'⁴³

37 Antoine Khair, "Le Statut Personnel dans les Villes de Tripoli et Beyrouth," in *Les Relations entre Musulmans et Chrétiens dans le Bilad al-Cham à l'époque ottomane aux XVII-XIX Siècles Apport des Archives des Tribunaux Religieux des Villes : Alep, Beyrouth, Damas, Tripoli*, ed. Louis Boisset et al. (Beirut: Anis Commercial Printing Press, 2005), 53–56 (54).

38 For more details, refer to B. Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); E. Ph. Engelhardt, *La Turquie et le Tanzimat*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Cotillon et Cie, Imprimeurs-Editeurs, 1882–1883) and A. Schopoff, *Les Reformes et la Protection des Chrétiens en Turquie: 1673–1904* (Paris: Plon, 1908).

39 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihiyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 7.

40 Georges Massouh, "Mahatât fi Nazarat Al-Orthozoks Al-Antâkiyyin Ilal-Islâm wal-Muslimin khilâl Al-qarn al-'Ishrin," in *Tarikh Kanisat Antakiya Lil-Rum Al-Orthozoks Ayat Khsousiyya* (Balamand: University of Balamand, 1999), 305–318 (311–312).

41 AD-SL Box 493, dossier *Traité Franco-Syrien. Minorités. Sous-dossiers*. "Meyrier to MAE, 8/5/1936," cited in Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 58.

42 Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 59.

43 Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 58.

The Dynamics of Arab Christians' Encounter with Islam

Arab Christians were not passive victims of history but active participants who reshaped their identity, contributed to their society, and adapted to the changing political landscape.

Various dynamics have resulted from the encounter between Arab Christians and Islam. This section will analyze the different modes of engagement of Arab Christians in the Islamic world. These interactions occurred on multiple levels and in different modalities.

Acculturation versus Resistance

The Christian encounter with Islam produced a reaction at the level of the perception of self and the other on both sides of the religious divide. Father Samir Khalil⁴⁴ studied the role of religion as a factor of integration as well as disintegration with a special emphasis on historical and cultural dimensions.⁴⁵ The cultural dynamics between conquered religious groups, mostly Christians, and the Arab-Muslim conquerors was deeply shaped by the process of acculturation.⁴⁶ 'Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.'⁴⁷ This acculturation bears an inherent identity threat to both religious communities, mainly in the form of assimilation. For many Christians, this assimilation entails a real risk of Islamization.⁴⁸ As a result, as Islam advanced some Christian communities adhered to their pre-Islamic identity (like Coptic in Egypt and Syriac in Syria) as a way to protect their identity and resist Islamization. History has shown, though, that such attitudes have resulted in the slow demographic erosion of these communities.⁴⁹ However, the other approach was the attempts undertaken by the philosophers and the theologians. They had an apologetic approach targeting their Christian co-religionists as

44 Samir Khalil Samir, S.J. is a Jesuit priest of Egyptian origin and a teacher at St. Joseph University in Beirut. He is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on Arab Christianity and Islam. He has been a visiting professor at many universities, including Georgetown, Cairo, and Bethlehem. He is the founder of CEDRAC, the Centre of Arabic Christian Documentation and Studies. He also directs the publication of the collection of the Arabic Christian Heritage, and is the president of the International Association for Christian Arabic Studies. He is the author of 20 books and about 500 scholarly articles concerning Islam and Christianity.

45 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 251–(251).

46 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 254.

47 Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville J. Herskovits, "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 38.1 (Jan–March, 1936): 149–152 (149).

48 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 258.

49 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 260.

well as their Muslim counterparts.⁵⁰ Some scholars believe that this approach was the precursor of ‘Im Al-Kālam, the Islamic scholastic theology, where exposing the Muslims to philosophy caused them to move from faith to theology.⁵¹ Such an approach was not exempt from the risk of the ‘contamination’ of Islam itself.⁵² However, as a result of their interaction with the Christians, the Muslims did assimilate the Byzantine, Syriac, and Coptic cultural heritages apart from their religion.⁵³ Therefore, the assimilation was a reciprocal process between the Muslims and the Christians who opted for cultural interaction.

Inculturation

Inculturation is ‘the movement which takes local cultures and their values as the basic instrument and a powerful means for presenting, formulating and living Christianity.’⁵⁴ From their earliest encounters, the Arab Christians strived to formulate their theological notions and translate their ecclesiastical books into Arabic. Challenged by Islam, their theological writings were polemic and apologetic targeting two distinctive audiences: the Muslims and their Christian theological adversaries. ‘There is in it a willingness to recognize an opportunity to proclaim Christianity’s claims to religious veracity in a new key and at the same time to discount the claims of Islam.’⁵⁵ However, rather than engaging in straightforward translation of theological discourse, these theologians strived to think afresh with an Arabic mind using the same axioms that were popular in the Muslim intellectual sphere. They deployed great efforts to explain Christian dogmas in a way that was understandable to ordinary Muslims.⁵⁶ It was a new and genuine formulation of Christianity moulded in an Arabic language with the presuppositions of the land of Islam.⁵⁷ It is an indigenization of their culture through the re-thinking of the Christian heritage through a Muslim lens. Rather than simply substituting words through literal translation, Christian translators like Hunayn Ibn Ishāq (808–873

50 Samir Khalil, Fr., “Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe,” *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 260.

51 Samir Khalil, Fr., “Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe,” *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 264.

52 Samir Khalil, Fr., “Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe,” *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 266.

53 Khalid Ibn al-Walid learned war strategies from the Byzantines. Georges Khodr, “Al-Masihyyun Al-‘Arab,” *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 13.

54 “Inculturation,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicolas Lossky et al., 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 571–572 (571).

55 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 232.

56 David Thomas, *Al-Masihyya Al-‘Arabiyya*, ed. and trans. Wagheeh Yussef (Cairo: Markaz Dirasāt Masihiyyat Al- Sharq Al-Awsat, 2014), 47.

57 David Thomas, *Al-Masihyya Al-‘Arabiyya*, ed. and trans. Wagheeh Yussef (Cairo: Markaz Dirasāt Masihiyyat Al- Sharq Al-Awsat, 2014), 48.

CE) and his disciples re-expressed the ideas from the mental structure of the Arab language.⁵⁸ On the other side of this, the Christians in the region developed, due to their mastering of the Arab language, an appreciation for the Qur'ān and a heartfelt affinity to some of its content.⁵⁹

Symbiotic Evolution: Common Culture

The main impact of these various types of interaction between Christians and Muslims is observed at the level of Muslim theology, and here we need to refer to the role of John of Damascus (675–749), one of the Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a polymath who wrote extensively on the Christian faith and practices in the context of Islam.⁶⁰ The Arab environment in which he grew up played a major role in shaping his thought. 'John of Damascus insisted upon portraying Islam as, in part, an outgrowth of a Christian heresy, Arianism. By the time he wrote, however, in the middle of the eighth century, there was good reason to think of Islam as an independent tradition.'⁶¹ Some believe that the influence exercised by John of Damascus on Muslim thinkers did not result from his Christianity or his critical writings on Islam, but primarily due to him being an enlightened Arab, a familiar figure to the Muslims and in harmony with the surrounding.⁶² Thus, he became in their eyes a living example of a 'Muslim' with all the meaning of this word.⁶³

The common culture is born in harmony and confluence of the diverse traditions without prejudices. It may be a logical sequence, yet all the phases mentioned above have co-existed in time and were present inter and intra Christianity and Islam.⁶⁴ However, this constructive encounter soon came to an end, especially with the high degree of sensitivity of Muslims towards those considered dhimmis (in the custody of Islam) and with the decision of the caliphate of Abd al-Malik bin Marwan (706–707 CE) for the strict use of Arabic as the official language for the state records and correspondences, thus resulting in the dismissal of a number of

58 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 273–274.

59 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 14.

60 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 281.

61 Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 93.

62 Daniel Sahas deals with this aspect in detail in his article on John of Damascus and his controversy with Muslims; as he says, 'It is not excluded that his book "The Fountain of Knowledge" provided both Al-Ash'ari, Ibn Hazm and Al-Shahristani with a plan of action from which they benefited in their works that dealt with sects and history of heresies.' Daniel Sahas, "The Arab Character in the Christian Debate with Islam," *Al-Ijtihad* 28 (1995): 109–138 (133–134).

63 Daniel Sahas, "The Arab Character in the Christian Debate with Islam," *Al-Ijtihad* 28 (1995): 135.

64 Samir Khalil, Fr., "Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe," *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 267.

Christians who were working in the administration of the caliphate.⁶⁵ These Greek and Syriac speaking Christians, though, played an instrumental role in setting up the administrative infrastructure for the emerging Islamic state.

The Paradigm Shift

The definition of minority used in this specific contribution refers to ‘a sense of solidarity’ which presumes a state of antagonism and the aim of ‘preserving’ identity elements.⁶⁶ It goes without saying that a society made up of diverse cultures, traditions, religions, or languages creates a conflict-prone environment. Diversity is the result of differences in perceptions, values, needs, goals, and opinions, and such differences can easily lead to conflict.⁶⁷ This explains the need to invest in preserving minority rights and thus advocating for religious freedom. ‘We should be scrupulous about our protection of religious liberty. This involves not only the rights of any religious minority, but also the rights of each individual.’⁶⁸ This protectionist minority attitude with its inward and exclusivist tendencies was exhibited in the way some groups of Christians resisted the incoming of Islam. However, some believe that there is a correlation between the decline in numbers of Christians and their diminishing impact due to isolation and a form ‘of ghetto-style existence ... despite the paradoxes of opportunity within the Islamic world.’⁶⁹ Moreover, the withdrawal and lack of interaction and dialogue ‘makes it easy to develop a stereotypical perception of the other, build up a climate of mutual suspicion, tension and anxiety, use minorities as scapegoats, and generally foster intolerance and discrimination.’⁷⁰ The Orthodox Church of Antioch has always struggled to overcome being a minority, a Christian District (Harat Nasara) in the land of Islam, and has strived for everyone to become citizens in their homelands with equal dignity where there is no preference over one another but all can live in freedom.⁷¹

Outward and Inclusive Paradigm

The cross-cultural and symbiotic dynamics have outward and inclusive tendencies. The challenges posed by the incoming of Islam as a faith and political entity motivated some Christians to opt for acculturation and benefit from the common Arab

65 Ezz El-Din Jessous, “Omar bin Abdul Aziz and the People of Dhimmia,” *Ijtihad* 28 (1995): 15–50 (36).

66 “Minorities,” in the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicolas Lossky et al., 2nd ed. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 779–780 (779).

67 Dudley Weeks, *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 33.

68 World Council of Churches, *Christians Meeting Muslims: WCC papers on 10 years of Christian Muslim Dialogue*, ed. John Taylor (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1977), 91.

69 Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 57.

70 Council of Europe, “Living Together as Equals in Dignity,” White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, CM(2008)30-final, 7 May 2008 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2008), 43.

71 Georges Khodr, “Min Wahy Al-Salib,” *Al-Nahar*, 14 September 1980.

linguistic platform to generate a new cultural reality. The Jacobite⁷² Yahya bin ‘Adi (d. 974 CE) provided a clear witness of the ‘convivencia’⁷³ in tenth-century Baghdad where no account of the city did not include a mention of a Christian intellectual. Yahya bin ‘Adi’s disciples were Christians of various denominations and influential Muslims in the renaissance of Islam in the Buyid age.⁷⁴ Yahya himself was the disciple of the famous Muslim philosopher Al-Farābi. This is a state of ‘osmosis’ where Christians were disciples of Muslims and vice versa. In philosophy, the ratio of six Muslims to four Christians is representative of the cultural situation by the end of the tenth century.⁷⁵ Notably, bin ‘Adi exhibited an ecumenical tendency to embrace the inter-religious and include the religious other within this solidarity. He was an early ecumenist in his affirmation that all Christians profess the same faith in Christ though they have different theological constructs.⁷⁶ Through an inter-religious vocabulary, he communicated his vision of a society in which Muslims and Christians cooperate in the pursuit of philosophy and knowledge with the aim of giving people an interest in eternal life.⁷⁷

This process reveals the dynamics of pluralism, ‘of meeting, exchange, and two-way traffic.’⁷⁸ This pluralism yields an end product that bears the features of diverse cultural and religious specificities while remaining genuine and deeply rooted in the pluralistic reality and life encounters. John of Damascus, mentioned earlier, is a clear example of such situations, and his loyalty was beyond doubt because the necessity of survival imposed interaction, coexistence, and cooperation.⁷⁹ Being a Christian minority under Islamic rule did not hinder the theological impact of the Arab Christians in the realm of Byzantine Christendom. In the Byzantine contro-

72 The term ‘Jacobite’ comes from Jacob Baradaeus (d. 578 CE), a Syriac bishop who revitalized the non-Chalcedonian (Miaphysite) Syriac Orthodox Church in the 6th century. Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Orthodox Church in the Modern Middle East In Oriental Christianity and Its Engagement with the Modern World*, ed. Andreas Schmoller. Religion and Society 69 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 37–52. notes that Baradaeus’ missionary work preserved the church under Byzantine persecution.

73 *Convivencia* is the Spanish for ‘coexistence’ and refers to the period in medieval Iberia (modern-day Spain and Portugal) when Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in relative harmony under Muslim rule, particularly during the Al-Andalus era (eighth to fifteenth centuries). However, some critics argue that it exaggerates harmony while downplaying oppression. See further Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005).

74 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 233.

75 Samir Khalil, Fr., “Religion et Culture en Proche Orient Arabe,” *Proche Orient Chretien* XXXIX (1989): 285.

76 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 235.

77 Sidney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7.2 (Autumn/Winter 2005): 234.

78 “From Diversity to Pluralism,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, 2020, 1, <https://pluralism.org/from-diversity-to-pluralism>.

79 Radwan El-Sayed, “Muslim Christian Relation, the Culture of Polemic and the Culture of Life,” *Ijtihad* 28 (1995): 5–14 (10).

versy around Icons, John of Damascus was accused of being 'saracen⁸⁰-minded' by the Iconoclasts while the iconodule side applied the same label to the iconoclastic Emperor Leo III.⁸¹ This is an example of the two-way traffic. This state of coexistence and cultural symbiosis remained until the Mamluk occupation and periodically under the Ottoman rule; then it gained a new momentum with the Arab cultural renaissance until today.⁸²

The issue of indigenization as a shared pluralistic reality may provide an explanation for the sustainability of the Christian presence, albeit as a minority, in the Levant (al-Mashreq) and its almost disappearance in North Africa (Al-Maghreb). 'The African church had produced an incomparable elite, but not a Christian people; the Barbarians and the divisions left her no time.'⁸³ The coexistence between the Berbers and those who were Latinized did not evolve in original symbiosis.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the indigenization/Arabization in the Levant spilled over from the cultural to solidarity in life issues and participation in political choices. This might be illustrated in more recent years in the Levant regarding the issue of Palestine. Archbishop Georges Khodr⁸⁵ wrote, 'On June 5, 1967, we effectively woke up on the call of humanity, the Christians and the Muslims were united in blood, because no blood was shed elsewhere in this world ... In order to be a Christian you had to take an attitude with regards to Palestine.'⁸⁶ The Christians and Muslims were bound together by the bloodshed in Palestine. The Arab identity became a pledge for freedom and the seeking of justice.⁸⁷ The vocation of Arab Christians is to live with and for the religious other as an expression of their faithfulness to their Christian ethos. Rooted in Christian mission, the church must be the church of the Arabs and for the Arabs. 'This is the calling of the Arab Christians; they have chosen God as their lot and the people of the East as their brethren.'⁸⁸ Father Jean

80 This term was used to refer to Arabs or Turks or anyone who confessed Islam as a religion.

81 Ahmad M. H. Shboul, "Arab Islamic Perceptions of Byzantine Religion and Culture," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122–135 (127).

82 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 12.

83 Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 191.

84 Father Jean Corbon, quoted in Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok, 1995), 193.

85 Georges Khodr is the founder and mentor of the Orthodox Youth Movement in Lebanon and Syria in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. He held a licence in law from the Jesuit University of St. Joseph in Beirut (1944) and a diploma in theology from l'Institut de Theologie Orthodoxe Saint-Serge, Paris (1952). He was ordained priest in 1954 and became the archbishop of Mount Lebanon in 1970. His great legacy was that of a renowned theologian holding two Honorary Doctorates from the Saint Vladimir Institute of Orthodox Theology in New York gained in 1968 and the Faculté de Théologie Protestante de Paris, gained in 1988. For more information on Bishop Georges Khodr, see the website dedicated to him, <http://georgeskhodr.org/en/category/biography/>.

86 Georges Khodr, *Al-Quds* (Beirut: Al-Nour Orthodox Publication Cooperative, 2003), 122–123.

87 Georges Khodr, *Al-Quds* (Beirut: Al-Nour Orthodox Publication Cooperative, 2003), 123.

88 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Al-'Arab," *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 23.

Corbon⁸⁹ expressed this challenge as an existential choice to be made by all Arab Christians: 'It is to become the future of what we are now, i.e., "The church of the Arabs" or we will vanish.'⁹⁰

Culture, religion, and language are the main identity features that each minority tries to preserve. Every community in renaissance needs to balance rootedness and openness. During the Abbasid period, for example, the Christians provided the vector of openness for Islamic culture to other Eastern cultures, and to the western cultures at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹¹ By adopting the Arabic language as the foundation for their cultural and theological frameworks, Eastern Christianity bridged the gap between these majority/minority groups. A group of people might be few in number but because of their self-awareness, they can choose to opt for engagement with the majority in a spirit of encounter and cooperation rather than confrontation. For Khodr, 'minority does not necessarily mean minoritization (Aqallawiyya). The former is a reality and the latter is a complex.'⁹² The Arab cultural identity was perceived as inclusive to Christians and Muslims. Arab Christians believed they had the duty to also witness to the Word of God in the land and the language where Islam entered. This mission would be achieved only in fellowship with the Muslims of the East. Arab Christians advocated for freedom and justice for all, and were in solidarity with their Arab fellows in all the challenges they were facing, with Palestine as an expressive example today. Therefore, the Orthodox perspective on minority is not focused on numbers, but is marked by its rootedness in the local Arab reality and challenges. Building real co-existence and a dialogue life are expressions of its contextual missionary witness. The Orthodox Church is called to be present and to build ways of living in solidarity and partnership with the people around them. It is not a foreign, Western church, but a church connected to the ground. It embodies the contextual witness to the reality of Christ and the kingdom in the context of Islam.

Finally, it is important to note that the minority issue has been deeply implicated in the political agendas of the West. Minority rights were perceived by the Muslims as a continuum of the colonial age and a pretext for Western interference in the internal affairs of the Arab states, resulting in discrimination and separation. 'Now, it is being re-used to promote division between Muslims and Christians, even between Muslims themselves, because it leads to having loyalties and affiliations

89 Father Jean Corbon (1924–2001) was of French origin and spent the last 36 years of his life in the Arab world serving as a Greek Melkite Catholic priest, theologian, and liturgist known for his significant contributions to liturgical theology and ecumenism; he played a key role in the Second Vatican Council's liturgical reforms. He was a fervent advocate in the ecumenical movement and played an influential role in the engagement of Eastern Christianity with Islam.

90 Jean Corbon, Fr., *Kanīsāt Al-Mahreq Al-'Arabi* (Beirut: Manshurāt Majles Kanā'es al-Sharq al-Awsat, 1996), 161.

91 Fr. Samir Khalil, "The Role of the Christians in the Abbasid Renaissance in Iraq and Syria (750–1050)," in *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr, Souad Abou el Rouss Slim, and Joseph Abou Nehra (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 2005), 32.

92 Georges Khodr, "Al-Masihyyun Fil-'Urubah," <http://www.ortmnb.org.lb/sermons/arabid.htm> (accessed 27 March, 2006).

to external hostile policies.’⁹³ Moreover, the fears resulting from the lack of democratic governance, restrictions on freedoms, and socioeconomic crises are wrongly attributed to tensions between Muslims and Christians, amplifying them into exaggerated and unfounded anxieties. ‘Evident equally among the majority and the minority, it pictures one religious group threatening the future of the other.’⁹⁴ For this reason, the divisive labelling of certain groups as ‘minorities’ can foster feelings of exclusion and inferiority. Misusing this term leads to tension and conflict, undermines progress, and deprives some citizens of their religious and civil rights, resulting in unjust discrimination.⁹⁵

To conclude, this quote by Khodr summarizes the peculiar minority paradigm of Christian Arabs whose dwindling numbers were not a hindrance to their active presence in shaping a shared reality and a common future with the Muslims in the East and to their contribution at the Christian theological level. They were rooted in Eastern Christianity, in solidarity with its inhabitants and their issues, and carrying a mission of bridge builder between Islam and the West:

Even though we became a precious minority, we will carry issues of the East because they are our issues. ... It is our least duty to call for a just view of Islam and of Eastern Christianity. They were both despised and burdened together and it is our hope that the west corrects these attitudes. We tell them, if they want justice they have to learn a little from Islam and a lot from Eastern Christians.⁹⁶

93 Al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence, 2017, https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/globalministries/pages/11958/attachments/original/1490358317/english_statement_Feb_2017.pdf?1490358317.

94 The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue, “Dialogue and Coexistence,” An Arab Muslim-Christian Covenant Document, adopted December 2001, 13, <https://agmcd.org/files/covenantant.htm>.

95 Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, “A Document on the Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” 3–5 February 2019, Article 8, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

96 Georges Khodr, “Al-Masihyyun Al-‘Arab,” *Lecture at the Anis K. Makdisi Cultural Program in Literature*, in 2007 (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2007), 22.

11 Identity, Witness, and Service of Protestants in the Middle East

The Perspectives of Hovhannes Aharonian,
Wanis Semaan, and George Sabra

Wilbert van Saane and George AlSahili

Abstract

The Protestant churches in the Middle East were founded in the nineteenth century as a result of the efforts of European and North American missionaries. They remained a small minority. In the postcolonial period, the Lebanese theologians Hovhannes Aharonian, Wanis Semaan, and George Sabra reflected on the identity, witness, and service of Protestants in the Middle East. Aharonian emphasized preaching and teaching as their essential contributions to church and society. Semaan called for contextualization, so that Protestantism would no longer be viewed as a foreign transplant. Sabra advocated Protestant participation in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. All three authors thought of Protestants as engaged citizens who have a valuable contribution, rather than a beleaguered minority.

Keywords: Middle East, Protestantism, ecclesiology, witness, service

Introduction

In 2025, Christians constituted about 3.6% of the total population of the Middle East, a sharp decline from 12.7% in 1900. The main reasons for this relative decline are lower birth rates and migration to other regions. It is no exaggeration to speak about an ‘ongoing exodus’ of Christians from the Middle East.¹ The causes for their migration are climate change, social inequality, war, terrorism, and rights violations.² Some of these causes are not specific to the Christian communities and have also prompted members of other communities to emigrate. However, due to a higher birth rate, Muslim populations have continued to grow in absolute and relative numbers. Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities have been more

1 Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, “Ongoing Exodus: Tracking Emigration of Christians from the Middle East,” *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* 3 (2014): 39–49.

2 Wilbert van Saane, “Middle East IMC Study Centre Thematic Report,” in *The Future of Mission Cooperation: The Living Legacy of the International Missionary Council*, ed. Risto Jukko (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022), 61–85 (65).

exposed to insecurity, which may lead to their vanishing³ or extinction.⁴ This has been an ongoing process and has intensified in the twenty-first century. In recent decades, Christian communities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have been forcibly displaced due to war and terrorism.

Protestants are only a small segment among the Christians of the region. It is difficult to find exact statistics, but scholars have spoken of Protestantism as a ‘minority within a minority’ or a ‘double minority.’⁵ The Protestant churches have a history of about 200 years in the region. This may seem short and insignificant in comparison with other Christian groups, some of which claim an uninterrupted presence from the time of the apostles of Jesus.⁶ Nevertheless, Protestants have substantially contributed to Christian witness and service. The fruit of their labour can be observed across the region in educational, medical, and social institutions.

In the postcolonial period, theologians from the region began to reflect on Protestant identity, witness, and service. This contribution examines the writings of three theologians who each served as President of the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut: Hovhannes Aharonian, Wanis Semaan, and George Sabra. These theologians clarified the self-understanding of Protestants in the Middle East from historical, ecclesiological, and missiological perspectives. Their interest lay especially with the churches in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. We will use the terms ‘Middle East’ and ‘Levant’ to refer to this geographical area.

In the Middle East, the term ‘minority’ began to be used for religious communities after World War II, in the context of the independent nation states. In the Ottoman period, the different religious communities were referred to as *millets*. *Millets* were confessional groups within the Ottoman Empire that were granted a degree of self-governance, especially with respect to personal and family status law. While the term *millet* is no longer in use, a confessional organization of society in which ethno-religious communities are guaranteed certain rights and liberties is still largely in place. To Protestants, this constitutes a problem because, to them, this sectarian arrangement appears to contradict their understanding of the church. The nature of the church in relation to the confessional system is one of the main problems in the ecclesiological reflection of Aharonian, Semaan, and Sabra.

3 Janine di Goiovanni, *The Vanishing: The Twilight of Christianity in the Middle East* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

4 Mariz Tadros “The Future of Christianity in North Africa and West Asia,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Mariz Tadros, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 441–452 (443).

5 Mitri Raheb, “Protestants,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 259–270 (269).

6 For an Orthodox perspective, see Chapter 10 in the current volume, by Elias El Halabi, “Arab Christians.”

The History of the Protestants of the Levant

Before turning to the works of Aharonian, Semaan, and Sabra, we briefly sketch the history of the Protestants of the Levant with an emphasis on their witness and service.

Protestant Missions to the Middle East

The Great Awakening, a spiritual revival movement, resulted in increased missionary zeal among North American and European Protestants. The Middle East was one of the territories that they identified as an appropriate ‘mission field,’ hoping to convert Muslims and Jews to Christianity. In the early nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire still ruled most of the Middle East. Islam was the privileged religion, but the Ottomans permitted Christian missionary work within certain limitations. The Protestant missionaries were somewhat aware of the complexities of Christian mission in such a context, but, upon arrival, they soon found that they had to alter their objectives and strategies rather drastically.

The story of American missionary Pliny Fisk (1792–1825) is illustrative. In his farewell sermon, which he preached just before he set sail for the Middle East, he remarked that ‘spiritual conquests’ among Muslims would require the church’s greatest exertions.⁷ Fisk was inspired by the life of the English missionary Henry Martyn (1781–1812) and hoped to influence Muslim intellectuals in a similar way. Upon arrival to the Middle East, this proved more difficult than it had seemed and, tragically, one of his biographers writes, Fisk was unable to build ‘incarnational relationships’ with Muslims.⁸ Nor was he able to establish good relations with the Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities he encountered in the Middle East. His work on an Arabic–English dictionary was cut short by his early death.

Fisk’s successors found it equally difficult to engage in active witness and service among Muslims and Jews. The Christians of the Middle East proved a more receptive audience. Seizing this new opportunity, the Protestant missionaries moved from evangelism among Muslims to Bible work and education among Orthodox and Catholic Christians. The aim of this new policy was ‘reviving and converting them without causing them to leave their churches of origin.’⁹ The Protestants hoped that, once revived, these Eastern Christians would illuminate their Muslim and Jewish neighbours.

7 Peter Kawerau, *Amerika und die Orientalischen Kirchen: Ursprung und Anfang der Amerikanischen Mission unter den Nationalkirchen Westasiens* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1958), 166.

8 John Hubers, *I Am a Pilgrim, a Traveler, a Stranger: Exploring the Life and Mind of the First American Missionary to the Middle East, the Rev. Pliny Fisk, 1792–1825* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 195.

9 Habib Badr, ‘Mission to ‘Nominal Christians’: The Policy and Practice of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and Its Missionaries concerning Eastern Churches Which Led to the Organization of a Protestant Church in Beirut (1819–1848)’ (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1992), i.

Mission among Orthodox and Catholics was not without problems either. The early missionaries chose a rather confrontational approach, spurred on by directives from the mission boards in Europe and North America.¹⁰ They translated the Bible, produced and disseminated religious literature, and worked for the conversion of individuals. All this provoked the anger of leaders of the Eastern and Oriental churches.

The growing hostility towards the missionaries made life very difficult for members of the Orthodox and Catholic churches who felt attracted to Protestant teachings. They were viewed with suspicion and could not remain part of their religious communities. This led to the creation of Protestant churches in the Middle East in the 1840s. The Protestants formed a new Christian subgroup. The Arab and Armenian Protestant communities were soon acknowledged as *millet*s, autonomous confessional communities, by the Ottoman authorities.¹¹

The Consolidation of Protestant Presence and Witness

The second half of the nineteenth century was an age of growth of Protestant activity and confidence. Protestant churches, schools, and other institutions increased in number. The 1860s, in particular, was the ‘decade of many missions.’¹² Protestant missionary societies responded to several crises, including the massacres in the Lebanese mountains in 1860 and the massacres of Armenians under Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the period 1894–1896, in the wake of which Protestant orphanages were opened.¹³

All this missionary and diaconal activity created new settings for interactions between Protestants and Muslims. The Ottoman authorities did not permit conversionist missions and, when defied, did not hesitate to shut down mission stations and printing presses.¹⁴ The missionaries had no other choice but to emphasize education, service, and dialogue. They operated their schools in the tension between evangelization and education.¹⁵

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, Protestant schools proved increasingly attractive to Arab, Armenian, and Greek families due to their association

10 Paul William Harris, *Nothing but Christ: Rufus Anderson and the Ideology of Protestant Foreign Mission* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71–76.

11 Habib Badr, “American Protestant Beginnings in the Middle East,” *NEST Theological Review* 14.2 (1993): 63–86.

12 Abdul Latif Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800–1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 150–190.

13 Paul Haidostian, “Foreign Missionary Activity Prior to and During the Armenian Genocide,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 39.1 (2022): 10–19.

14 Abdul Latif Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800–1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 172–173.

15 Ellen Fleischmann, “Evangelization or Education: American Protestant Missionaries, the American Board, and the Girls and Women of Syria,” in *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 263–280.

with Western culture and their good standing. With popular demand growing and new waves of missionaries arriving, the schools also showed a tendency towards secularization.¹⁶

The Protestant churches remained a small demographic. An optimistic estimate put the number of Protestants in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine at 7,000 in the year 1900. This figure included not only church members but also pupils of the schools.¹⁷ The majority of the modest numbers of converts to Protestantism continued to come from Orthodox and Catholic backgrounds, not from Islamic communities.

In light of this, some scholars have concluded that the conversion of the Middle East, which the first missionaries had pursued, may be declared a failed project. The missionaries had ended up achieving something quite different, namely to be a bridgehead of Western culture and education.¹⁸ Other scholars point out that the influence of the missionaries reached well beyond their schools, for example, through the translation and dissemination of the Bible. The legacy of the Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century remains a subject of scholarly debate.¹⁹

Ruptures and Threats in the Twentieth Century

A major rupture was caused by the massacres and deportations of Armenians, Syrians, and Greeks in Anatolia, where Protestantism had grown faster than in the Levant. According to one estimate, 51,000 Armenian Evangelical Christians lived in what is today Turkey before the genocide. They had 137 churches and 82 ordained ministers. After the genocide, only 14,000 remained, in only 31 churches, served by 25 pastors.²⁰ Many perished; many others were displaced to cities like Aleppo and Beirut. When life in post-genocide Turkey proved impossible for most remaining Christian communities, they too migrated. Thus, the Armenian and Syriac Protestants became part of the fabric of Levantine societies and formed congregations, schools, and medical and social work. They boosted and somewhat altered Protestant presence and witness.

The fortunes of the Protestant minority briefly turned under the British and French League of Nations mandates. During this period, the Protestants further consolidated their educational, social, and medical work in the region. The

16 Samir Khalaf, *Protestant Missionaries in the Levant: Ungodly Puritans, 1820–60* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 220–221.

17 Abdul Latif Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria 1800–1901* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 280–281.

18 Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1–15.

19 Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Introduction,” in *New Faith in Ancient Lands*, 14–17. See also Habib Badr, “The Protestant Evangelical Community in the Middle East: Impact on Cultural and Societal Developments,” *International Review of Mission* 89.352 (2000): 60–69.

20 Vahan Tootikian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church* (Detroit, MI: Armenian Heritage Committee, 1982), 54.

French and British governments had an interest in such work, accommodated, and sometimes sponsored it.²¹ However, friction between the governments and the Protestants emerged over other issues. Evangelism remained a particular source of tension. The mandate governments feared interconfessional tensions and were eager to reassure Muslim communities. Protestants, including the missionaries who served their communities, also found themselves opposed to governmental policies on Arab nationalism and Zionism.²²

A new era began when the League of Nations mandates ended and Lebanon (1943), Jordan (1946), and Syria (1946) became independent. Only the status of Palestine remained contested. The position of the Protestants in these new states was precarious, for many perceived them as brokers of British and American interests. The expulsion of Protestant missionaries from Syria in the 1950s was an ominous sign. As it turned out, however, Arab, Armenian, and Syriac Protestant communities were afforded varying degrees of rights and liberties and, in some cases, even saw a period of bloom in the 1960s. However, wars and upheaval in the second half of the twentieth and the first quarter of the twenty-first centuries impacted their fortunes adversely. The emigration of members left the Protestant churches weakened.

How did the Protestants define their position in the newly independent nations of the Middle East? And how did they describe their mission and service to their societies? We now turn to the ecclesiological reflections of Aharonian, Semaan, and Sabra. We have chosen to present the views of these three theologians because of their astuteness and because, while living and working in Beirut, they attempted to speak for the Protestants of the region. The Near East School of Theology, where they taught, had a regional function, serving the Protestant churches of Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and beyond.²³ Additionally, these three theologians represent three different stages in the postcolonial development of Protestantism in the Levant.

Hovhannes Aharonian: A Witnessing and Serving Minority

Hovhannes P. Aharonian (1909–1986), a survivor of the Armenian genocide, was a Christian educator in the Armenian Evangelical Church and a respected

21 For an example, see Philippe Bourmaud, “Between Nationalism, Internationalism and the Colonial Quadrillage: The Action Chrétienne en Orient in Mandatory Syria (1922–1946),” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 39.1 (2022): 30–44, doi: 10.1177/02653788211068054.

22 Laura Robson, “Church, State, and the Holy Land: British Approaches to Imperial Policy in Palestine, 1917–1948,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39.3 (2011): 457–477.

23 The Near East School of Theology was established in 1932 as a merger and continuation of several theological seminaries founded by Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century. From the outset, the main objective of the school was the training of pastors and Christian educators for the churches in the Middle East. The study of Islam was also a priority from the very beginning. See George F. Sabra, *Truth and Service: A History of the Near East School of Theology* (Beirut: Antoine, 2009), 87–106.

ecumenical theologian. For almost three decades, he served as moderator of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, for which he edited a constitution, bylaws, and a handbook for ministers. He worked and taught at the Near East School of Theology for 37 years. He was the first person from the Middle East to be its President (1957–1978).²⁴ He also served as co-president of the Middle East Council of Churches, and he was a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.²⁵

During Aharonian's decades of service, the League of Nations mandates came to an end, and the independent nations emerged. Nation-building was a major theme in the ecumenical movement in the years following World War II. The Protestant churches of the Middle East were eager to contribute. During these decades, the ecumenical movement institutionalized, both on the regional and international levels. Ecumenical institutions included many newly autonomous Protestant churches and some Orthodox churches. This signalled a move towards more egalitarian and respectful relations between Protestants and the ancient churches of the Middle East. In ecumenical encounters, ecclesiological questions were a chief concern, which prompted churches to rethink their identities and specific contributions.

Traces of all these developments are unmistakable in Aharonian's writings. He designed an evangelical ecclesiology for a church in a minority position in the Middle East. Aharonian's ecclesiology had special relevance for the understanding of citizenship of Christians in the Middle East, the role of Christian education, and social work.

When defining the nature of the church, Aharonian trod carefully. He was aware that Scripture and tradition did not offer an unequivocal definition of the church. He thought of the church in thoroughly Trinitarian terms: it is God's creation, founded on salvation through Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit. To him, the emphasis on Christ as the foundation implied a non-hierarchical and non-clerical understanding of the church. In terms that are reminiscent of John Calvin's works, Aharonian thought of the church as a community of saved sinners.²⁶

This community, Aharonian pointed out, is permanently under construction. The chief source of its upbuilding is preaching. The preaching of the Word in the context of worship is communication, which is not an end in itself, he argued. Such communication must lead to witness and service, which go hand in hand.²⁷

24 George F. Sabra, *Truth and Service: A History of the Near East School of Theology* (Beirut: Antoine, 2009), 144.

25 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 80–81.

26 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 55–57.

27 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Building of the Armenian Evangelical Church* (Beirut: UAECNE, 1979), 26.

Aharonian emphasized that the Armenian Evangelical ideal was to form a group of people who lived a humble and pure Christian life; preached the Word in the simplest way possible to ensure comprehension; made the Bible available in readable and understandable translations; and served the needy in practical ways. In these ways, Aharonian believed, Protestants could impact non-Protestant traditions.²⁸

In Aharonian's view, Christian education is a natural continuation of the preaching of the Word.²⁹ As our exploration of the history of Protestantism has demonstrated, education was probably the greatest gift Protestants gave to the societies of the Middle East. Aharonian's intellectual contribution was to embed Christian education in Protestant ecclesiology. He viewed Christian education as a form of evangelism. Christian education primarily concerned church members but had its natural extension in service and evangelism for the benefit of others.³⁰ Christian education took place in Sunday schools and youth gatherings; the Protestant schools were the organic continuation of this. In the Evangelical schools, worship and Bible reading were to be practised regularly, Aharonian argued. The purpose of the schools was both general education and evangelism, understood as respectful, patient Christian education that fostered a salvific experience of God.³¹ We observe that, in Aharonian's work, there is no hard distinction between general education and Christian education, but that general education is permeated by the spirit of Christian education. The theological foundation for this is the creation in the image of God, which implies that human beings cannot be fully human without God.³²

According to Aharonian, the ultimate purpose of Christian education was the formation of Christ-like characters who were prepared to meet the needs of the communities to which they belonged. To him, a conscience shaped by the Word of God was crucial to responsible and mature citizenship.³³ Here comes the importance of social work in Aharonian's ecclesiological design. He viewed social work as a manifestation of responsible, mature citizenship. Social work, he argued, was a primary instrument for community building. The Armenian Evangelicals of the

28 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Building of the Armenian Evangelical Church* (Beirut: UAECNE, 1979), 27.

29 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 107.

30 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 107.

31 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 92.

32 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 115.

33 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 93.

Middle East have a strong record of institutional social work. In all this, we see the close connection between Christian education and citizenship in Aharonian's thought.

Aharonian also reflected on the role of an ethnic Christian minority, such as the Armenians, in the societies of the Middle East. He emphasized that Armenian Evangelicals were loyal in service to the wider Armenian community,³⁴ denying accusations that Armenian Evangelicals lacked Armenian nationalistic values.³⁵ Nevertheless, he argued that any church should first and foremost consider itself part of the universal church, called to witness in a certain local, social, cultural, and national context. It should engage in mission and service beyond its own community.³⁶ It should not be identified with a specific nation and ethnicity to the extent that nationalism becomes one of its pillars or purposes.³⁷ Thus, Aharonian was in favour of a broad scope of evangelization.³⁸ He also reminded his community of the importance of social and political involvement.³⁹ This should come naturally to people who were accustomed to a congregational church polity, which was the equivalent of democracy in the political arena, Aharonian thought.⁴⁰ In Aharonian's view, the church was to serve society as a church built on the preaching of the Word, rather than as a specific ethnic, nationalistic, or political group.

Wanis Semaan: A Contextual and Prophetic Minority

Wanis Semaan (1934–2010) served as a professor of Practical Theology (1973–1989) and as President of the Near East School of Theology (1985–1989). His tenure almost entirely overlapped with the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). During these decades, churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America asserted their independence and their unique theological contributions. The heritage of the Western missionaries was questioned, and lingering paternalism was exposed. Some called for a moratorium on Western missions. In the Middle East, American and European

34 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 143.

35 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 146–147.

36 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 217.

37 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 89.

38 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Armenian Evangelical Church at the Crossroads*, ed. Y. Kassouni (Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), 213–214.

39 Paul Haidostian, "Armenian Evangelical Youth and Political Identity: The Socio-Political Aloofness of the Armenian Evangelical Church in the Near East in View of Hovhannes Aharonian's Agenda for an Involved Ecclesiology and Erik H. Erikson's Understanding of the Continuity between Individual and Community" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1993), 125.

40 Hovhannes Aharonian, *The Building of the Armenian Evangelical Church* (Beirut: UAECNE, 1979), 28.

Protestant missionaries dramatically reduced the number of expatriate personnel. Many mission properties were devolved to the local churches. The ecumenical tensions of these decades are tangible in Semaan's writings.

Semaan emphasized the importance of local expressions of Christianity and criticized foreign missionaries for their inadequate understanding of Levantine culture. He pointed out that the first missionaries to the Middle East had been impatient and had not taken time to study the cultures and history of the people they came to evangelize. They had not realized that the cultures of the Orthodox and Catholic communities they encountered were 'the consequence of over 300 years of subjugation to non-Christian rulers, where, in order to survive, the Christians had had to appropriate some of the practices of their rulers and their general milieu.'⁴¹ Instead of patient cultural study, they had imposed foreign, uncongenial cultural forms on those who were attracted to Protestantism, Semaan argued. He concluded that 'the foreign missionary with a completely different cultural tradition and a completely different tradition appears to be ill-fitted' for mission in the Muslim context of the Middle East.⁴² Instead, 'the Christian is called on to be a Christian in the society in which he lives.'⁴³ In other words, mission is the work of local Christians.

The problem that Semaan addressed was whether Protestants were indeed local Christians in the Middle East. His answer to this question was ambivalent. He characterized the identity of the Protestant churches of the Middle East as 'aliens at home.' He applied the term 'alien' to the ecclesiology that was introduced by the Protestant missionaries from abroad. In the view of the missionaries, the church was a congregation of individual believers, a spiritual family. In Semaan's view, this contrasted with the community-based ecclesiologies of the existing Middle East church families, which aligned with the Oriental societal structures, especially their emphasis on the extended family. The new Protestant ecclesiology challenged 'all that was meaningful in a society which placed great value on the family.'⁴⁴ By extension, he used the term 'alien' to refer to the process of alienation of people from their original communities when they became members of the Protestant churches. The new converts became rootless, cut off from their past.

In Semaan's work, the phrase 'at home' refers to the subsequent adaptation of the Protestant ecclesiology. According to Semaan, the Protestant community struck new roots into Middle Eastern soil, realigning its ecclesiology with the societal structures. The exclusive focus on the spiritual family was mitigated, and the extended family became part of the understanding of the church. In churches with a Presbyterian polity, pastors began to function as pastor-bishops, as heads of the extended spiritual family. The churches that followed a congregational polity also

41 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 94.

42 Wanis Semaan, "Christian Mission in a Muslim Context," *NEST Theological Review* 6.1 (1985): 6–21 (18).

43 Wanis Semaan, "Christian Mission in a Muslim Context," *NEST Theological Review* 6.1 (1985): 19.

44 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 90.

tended towards this model. In this way, the Levantine Protestants modified the 'alien' ecclesiology that they inherited from the missionaries.⁴⁵ Semaan evaluated this process of contextualization positively and advocated for a Protestant bishop as suited to Middle Eastern culture.⁴⁶

This unique development of Middle Eastern Protestantism afforded it opportunities for witness and service, Semaan believed. Because Protestantism was a minority with a twofold identity, its presence could be a yeast in society, he argued.

The Protestant Church in Lebanon maintains a good relationship with both the Christians on the one hand and the Moslems on the other. And being a minority as such and one which accepts its role as a minority, it can perhaps be the more able to move with freedom unparalleled among the other religious communities.⁴⁷

The Protestant communities did not always make the most of these opportunities, Semaan observed. They often viewed their minority status as a disadvantage and behaved as a 'frightened small minority.' He spoke about 'this present sickness in which the church finds herself,' by which he meant that the church was too concerned with itself instead of engaging in service to those in need.⁴⁸ The churches needed to be aware that 'our love and devotion to [Jesus] is gauged by our service to Him by serving one another.'⁴⁹

To fulfil their call to be a yeast in the Middle Eastern societies, the Protestant churches needed to embrace a prophetic role, Semaan believed. In their preaching and teaching, the churches were called to rock the boat by questioning the prevailing systems of meaning.⁵⁰ He cited the Protestant community in the city of Sidon, where Semaan worked before he was appointed to the NEST, as a positive example of witness and service in a religiously diverse context. At this time, the Protestant Church of Sidon was a flourishing community that ran a vibrant school.

In their service and witness, the Protestant churches needed to continue the process of accommodation that they had already begun, Semaan maintained. He differentiated between content and form and argued that 'non-essential forms' are 'culturally and historically conditioned.'⁵¹ The latter should be closely linked to

45 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 107–117.

46 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 136.

47 Wanis Semaan, "On the Church in Lebanon," 12, NEST Archives 3.260.

48 Wanis Semaan, "The Universality of the Gospel and the Meaning of Mission in the Light of Pentecost," address given at the Near East School of Theology, 2 June 1963, NEST Archives 3.260.

49 Wanis Semaan, "The Unavoidable Question," sermon preached at the Near East School of Theology, 12 April 1964, NEST Archives 3.260

50 Wanis Semaan, "Pastor as Prophet, Priest, and King," undated address given at the Near East School of Theology, NEST Archives 3.260.

51 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 156.

the prevailing culture. This meant that the Protestant churches of the Middle East had to shrug off much of their missionary heritage. Contextualization, or accommodation as he called it, was the main order of business. It is not entirely clear what Semaan believed to be unchangeable content and what he regarded as contextualizable form. Neither did he comment on the inextricability of content and form. Despite these omissions, his plea for a contextual church was timely, aiming to strengthen Protestant witness and service in the postcolonial Middle East.

Semaan's understanding of mission reflected missiological developments in the ecumenical movement in the 1970s and 1980s. To him, mission was no longer to be understood in terms of sending and receiving missionaries. Of course, the missionaries had done much good 'in education, in medicine, in social welfare, and other areas of service,' a foundation on which the Protestant churches could build.⁵² But Semaan preferred to speak about God's mission in which the local churches participated. God's mission was about the liberation of the oppressed and the transformation of culture, Semaan argued.⁵³ To participate in God's mission in the Middle East, Protestants needed to be 'at home' in that context.

George Sabra: A Self-Consciously Protestant Minority, Open to Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue

George Sabra (born 1953) is a Reformed Lebanese theologian who served on the faculty of the Near East School of Theology from 1986 to 2024. He was its President from 2012 to 2024. During his years of service, the Middle East witnessed repeated political and military crises, most notably wars in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq. It was also the time in which Islamist terrorist groups emerged and launched traumatic attacks on targets around the world. These developments were detrimental to the Christian communities of the Middle East, who went through a phase of decline.

Sabra has written many thoughtful texts on Protestant identity, ecumenical relations, and Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East. In his writings, he takes seriously the demographic changes caused by the chronic regional socio-economic and political instability. He responds to the allegation that Middle Eastern Protestants have an identity crisis because of their close connection to Western colonial powers. Like his predecessor Semaan, he addresses the claim that Protestantism is a foreign plant in Middle Eastern soil, in which it cannot grow unless it conforms to the ground.⁵⁴ In short, he addresses the continuing mission of the declining Protestant communities.

52 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 157.

53 Wanis Semaan, *Aliens at Home: A Socio-Religious Analysis of the Protestant Church in Lebanon and its Backgrounds* (Beirut: Longman and Librairie de Liban, 1984), 159.

54 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 86–92.

Sabra argues that, despite their small demographic, Protestants have a vital role in the Middle East. He observes that Protestants tend to be more prone to emigration than other religious communities. Emigration may be prompted by political and economic turmoil, but is also more generally related to Protestant culture and education, in which Protestants appropriate Western, secular values.⁵⁵ Their numerical decline notwithstanding, Sabra stresses that Protestant presence in the region is not a historical accident. 'I believe that Protestants in this region have an important role,' he says, 'and that their presence is in accordance with the will of God and is not just an outcome of some historical situations.'⁵⁶

In Sabra's view, the Protestant Reformation, although born and nurtured in the West, is not exclusively tied to Western culture. He does not deny the historical connection between Protestantism and (Western) modernity. He argues that the message of the Reformation is, however, not culture-specific but a universal message which concerns the heart of the gospel and is directed at the universal church. According to Sabra, Middle Eastern Protestants should remind themselves of this universal appeal of the Reformation, for this is where they can find their identity and their unique contribution. 'The Protestant presence in the Middle East,' as Sabra puts it, 'is an extension of the Reformation movement along with its agenda of going back to the roots of the first church.'⁵⁷ The message of the Reformation is the core identity of Protestants. Evidently, this has implications for their witness and service.

Sabra points out that evangelism has been part and parcel of the identity of Protestants in the Middle East, a legacy of the missionaries who founded their churches. While their evangelistic efforts have extended to Muslims as well as to Orthodox and Catholics, most converts have come from the latter. The rise of the ecumenical movement, which was pioneered by Protestants, has made such proselytism problematic. In Sabra's view, a rejection of proselytism does not mean that Protestants can no longer evangelize. Protestants with evangelistic zeal:

cannot totally control the effects of their work, but they can make sure that their evangelization is not planned to reach other denominations. If and when they do reach people of other denominations, they should not attempt to convert them to a different tradition but witness to them and serve their human needs.⁵⁸

To Sabra, Protestant participation in ecumenical dialogue is essential for theology and church life. The ecumenical dialogue should not have a polemical nature,

55 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 102.

56 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 101.

57 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 96.

58 George Sabra, "Proselytism, Evangelisation and Ecumenism," *Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 9.2 (1988): 23–36 (32–33).

focusing on what separates. Instead, it should be an open conversation that sheds light on what unites. In such a conversation, Protestants should draw not just from the missionary legacy of the nineteenth century, but from the sources of the Reformation, while respecting the early church fathers as important authorities for their conversation partners.⁵⁹

Christian-Muslim dialogue has also been one of Sabra's major concerns. Some of his works explicitly address the position of Christians in Islamic contexts. In an oft-cited article, he describes two postures or two ways of being a Christian in the Middle East.⁶⁰ He calls the first 'Arab Christian' and the second 'Eastern Christian.' The 'Arab Christian' is Sabra's term for an openness to the Islamic environment, which stems from a desire to be accepted and a search for common ground between Christians and Muslims. The West, which has always been an element in Christian-Muslim relations and has often engaged in imperialism, is viewed as a source of disruption of healthy relations between Christians and Muslims. According to this position, there is much that binds together Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and there is much that separates Christians from the East and Christians from the West.⁶¹ The 'Eastern Christian,' on the other hand, is deeply concerned for the freedom and integrity of Christians in the Middle East and an orientation towards the West. This position often emphasizes that Christian communities are not Arab by ethnicity. Christianity, it argues, is closely associated with Western philosophical and cultural traditions and views Islam as a greater threat than the West.⁶² In Sabra's view, the first type was more prevalent during the twentieth century. In the context of Arab nationalisms, there seemed to be much common ground between Christians and Muslims.⁶³ The rise of political Islam around the turn of the century changed this. The common ground melted away and brought the 'Arab Christian' type into a crisis. The 'Eastern Christian' type seems, as a result, to be more widely adopted in the early twenty-first century. Sabra notes that the political impact of this shift is minimal, for the influence of Christian communities has declined.⁶⁴

In any case, Sabra argues that the continuous dialogue between Christians and Muslims is crucial. In his view, the Christian communities of the Middle East are called to impact and transform the predominantly Islamic societies of the Middle East by partnering with Muslims for a better quality of life on all levels. They are

59 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 92–97.

60 George Sabra, "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.1 (2006): 43–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500399342>.

61 George Sabra, "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.1 (2006): 46–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500399342>.

62 George Sabra, "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.1 (2006): 48–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500399342>.

63 For a short introduction to the rise of secular nationalisms in the Middle East, see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 579–581.

64 George Sabra, "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17.1 (2006): 50–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500399342>.

called to 'salten' Islam, so that peaceful coexistence, freedom of conscience, and a degree of separation of religion and state are safeguarded.⁶⁵

If Protestants maintain a clear vision of their identity, they will continue to contribute to Middle Eastern societies in unique ways.⁶⁶ That means that, in the first place, they need to balance piety and intellect. On the one hand, Protestantism has been marked by a seriousness concerning faith in Jesus Christ and his salvific work. On the other hand, it has been known for its openness to scientific work. In Sabra's view, these two dimensions are of enduring importance and should not be separated from each other.

Secondly, Protestants should remember that their future is tied to the future of other Christian denominations. They should be able not only to coexist with other Eastern Christian denominations but also to serve them. Sabra invites Protestants to dedicate their identity, principles, and activities to the service of other Christians. This should be done not in a polemical spirit, as was the case in the nineteenth century, but in a spirit of openness and ecumenism, embracing the other traditions not just because they are older but because it is the will of God for all of us to be one in Him. Sabra points out that differences are not always negative, but help conserve identities and induce creativity.⁶⁷

Finally, Protestants should be able to distinguish between church and sect. In the Ottoman millet system, minorities survived by belonging to a recognized religious-political institution. An uncritical continuation of and dependency on this system is detrimental to the call of Protestantism in the region, Sabra believes. He warns that the future of Protestantism is threatened if concern for sectarian presence takes up much of its energy. Instead, the focus should be on the church. Hence, while living in a confessional political system, Protestants should opt for secularization and the separation of church and state. This will ensure an environment of religious rights and freedom in which Protestants are not a sect or a confessional community but a church in the proper sense of the word. In such an environment, they could freely witness to their faith, render service to those in need, and as loyal citizens, contribute to society in general.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The writings of Hovhannes Aharonian, Wanis Semaan, and George Sabra provide the vulnerable Protestant communities with hopeful and praxis-oriented

65 George Sabra, "Christian Mission in the Wake of the Arab Spring," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38.3 (2014): 115–118.

66 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 109–114.

67 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 96–97.

68 George Sabra, *For the Sake of Ecumenical Dialogue: Protestant Theological Articles* (Beirut, Lebanon: Clarion Publishing House, 2001), 112–113.

perspectives. They remind them that their minority status has never been an obstacle to faithful witness and service.

The writings of these authors show some apologetic tendencies, responding to allegations that Protestants are foreign, Western, and lacking in solidarity with their compatriots. Naturally, their apologetic remarks are not only addressed to Protestantism's critics but also to Protestant communities themselves. Within the Armenian context, Hovhannes Aharonian made a case for the social relevance of the Evangelicals, especially through evangelism, service, and education. Coming from an Arab Protestant tradition, Wanis Semaan advocated cultural accommodation. George Sabra exhorted Protestants to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation, based on their Reformation heritage and identity. This is essential because, in the Middle East, Protestantism is interwoven with other Christian traditions. Sabra argued that withdrawal, or isolation as a kind of *millet*, is unhelpful to Protestants themselves and society at large.

All three authors presented the ideal of Protestants as responsible citizens of Middle Eastern societies. They observed signs that this was becoming a reality in the independent nation-states. They noted that Protestantism had an important contribution to offer to their nations, especially through its educational efforts. They realized that adjustments were needed, both in society at large and in the attitude of Protestants. In short, they preferred to think of Protestants not as a beleaguered minority but as fully engaged citizens.

Yet, according to these theologians, the unique and most valuable contribution of Protestants lay not in their citizenship; it was in their faithfulness to the principles of the Protestant Reformation, especially the principle of *sola scriptura* – the Bible as the ultimate source for faith and life, witness, and service. The mission of Protestantism in the Middle East, they agreed, is to preach and teach the Scriptures as life-giving and transforming for all. Ultimately, the strangeness of Protestantism does not stem from its Western roots or its relatively late introduction into the region, but from its commitment to the Bible and the gospel of grace.

The approach of these Protestant theologians is characterized by a dialectic between church and world. To them, the Protestant churches of the Middle East transcend their worldly roots without uprooting themselves from their culture, which is their lens for understanding Scripture and their realm of coexistence with other traditions. All three theologians are convinced that the Reformation has an enduring, universal value without being indifferent to particularity. This conviction is the engine and hope of Protestant witness and service. It also implies a twofold warning to Protestants, neither to betray their reformed faith, nor to escape their cultural roots.

12 Sunni Islamic Perspectives on Muslim Minorities in the West

Razi H. Quadir

Abstract

The lasting establishment of numerous Muslims in Western liberal democracies has sparked various debates among Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā’*). This new context has raised questions not only on how to navigate these new circumstances but also about the fundamental issue of whether Muslims possess the right to establish permanent residences in non-Muslim countries. This contribution explores the discourse surrounding Muslims living in non-Muslim regions through the lens of three distinct approaches within Sunni Islam: the puritan approach, the renewalist approach, and the traditional approach.

Keywords: *dār al-Islam*, *dār al-kufr*, Muslim minorities, *Fiqh al-aqallīyāt*, Salafi, traditional

Introduction

The permanent settlement of many Muslims in Western liberal democracies ignited several discussions among Muslim scholars (*‘ulamā’*). Not only has this new situation led to questions as to how to deal with the new situations, but also to the fundamental question of whether Muslims are entitled to settle permanently in non-Muslim countries. In this contribution, I will discuss the debate regarding Muslims living in non-Muslim lands according to three approaches in Sunni Islam: the puritan approach, renewalist approach, and the traditional approach.

Historical Background and Liberalism

Since the dawn of Islam more than 1,400 years ago, Muslims have been living in many parts of the world. Most Muslims have lived and are living as a majority, but currently approximately one-third are living as a minority. For example, India harbours approximately 200 million Muslims, making up 14% of the population. Historically speaking, as Khalid Abou El Fadl points out, the position of Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim lands has been the topic of juristic debate since at

least the eighth century.¹ However, what has sparked another debate among Muslim scholars regarding Muslim minorities is the large-scale migration of Muslims to liberal democracies.² This is probably due to the fact that, as Andrew March aptly puts it, ‘Western political systems, for all their differences, regard themselves as having principled approaches to the dilemmas of social and political life in the conditions of cultural and religious pluralism and tend to expect all of their citizens (including Muslims) to endorse these approaches.’³ In other words, a liberal democracy demands active citizenship.⁴ Although this is not the place to delve in an exhaustive discussion on liberalism, a few remarks are in order. Liberalism considers itself superior to other political systems and believes the world would be better off if it is ruled solely by liberal regimes.⁵ Liberal states defend this universality in terms of worldwide values that make explicit and implicit requests on the Muslim conscience. Unlike Muslim minorities in China, East Africa, India, Israel, Russia, and Southeast Asia, Muslim minorities in liberal democracies are told that the predominant liberal values of equality, public civic education, religious tolerance, gender equality, moderate civic loyalty, and universal citizenship are not merely conditional political demands that a specific regime poses in exchange for religious freedom and security, but values that represent the achievements of Modernity and the Enlightenment and are political practices that all states in the world should embrace. At the same time, political liberalism does not need to define itself as metaphysically true, so Western societies do not have to explicitly demand that Muslims give up Islamic truth claims. This hallmark of political liberalism, presenting itself as epistemically silent and thus detached from any particular metaphysical doctrine, shows, according to March, signs of being extremely attractive to Muslim thinkers.⁶

The Definition and Scope of a Muslim Minority

Before we embark on the issue of Muslims living as a minority, it is essential to carefully outline what we mean by a Muslim minority. Is it just a numerical

1 Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities: The Juristic Discourse on Muslim Minorities from the Second/Eighth to the Eleventh/Seventeenth Centuries,” *Islamic Law and Society* 1.2 (1994): 141–187 (141).

2 According to Al-Alwani, “Muslim minorities did not attract as much attention in the past as they do today,” see Taha Jābir Al-Alwani, *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), xiii.

3 Andrew F. March, “Sources of Moral Obligation to Non-Muslims in the ‘Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities’ (*Fiqh al-Aqalliyyāt*) Discourse,” *Islamic Law and Society* 16.1 (2009): 34–94 (36), <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851908X413757>.

4 For example, in Belgium, it is mandatory to vote during elections.

5 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 53.

6 Andrew F. March, “Sources of Moral Obligation to Non-Muslims in the ‘Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities’ (*Fiqh al-Aqalliyyāt*) Discourse,” *Islamic Law and Society* 16.1 (2009): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851908X413757>.

minority, or is it a minority which has ruling power?⁷ It is imperative to make this distinction because there were, and are, countries with Muslim minorities as the dominant power. For example, India, with a Hindu majority, has been ruled for centuries by a Muslim minority.⁸ In this contribution the focus is primarily on Muslims living under a non-Muslim majority and who do not have ruling power. That is, non-Muslims who are not in a position of ruling power, living, for example, in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. These Muslims cannot formulate and enforce legislation within the state, nor are they able to decide which other states to have relationships with.⁹ The corollary of this is that it can lead to confusion among Muslims. They may ask themselves,

As we are not living in a state governed by the *shari'a*, nor do we have the upper hand, how should we live? Is it by almost complete isolation and if the possibility arises, by returning to the Muslim world? Should we integrate into a liberal society and if yes, how? How much leeway do we have to integrate into a non-Muslim society? Or should we opt for assimilation because we are living outside the realm of Islam?

I would maintain that these questions are rightly the focus of sustained debate among Muslims living in Western liberal democracies in the present day.¹⁰

Political-Legal Jurisdictions

Another dimension that in my opinion needs due attention is what outlook Muslim scholars have on the world in terms of political-legal jurisdictions. Classical Muslim scholars had a binary vision: the abode of Islam (*dār al-Islam*) and the abode of unbelievers (*dār al-kufr*), the latter sometimes denoted as the abode of war (*dār al-ḥarb*). The *dār al-Islam* included the community of Muslims (*ummah*) as well as non-Muslims (mostly Christians and Jews) who had an alliance with Islam. The *dār al-ḥarb* was viewed by Muslim scholars as a territory that had not been brought under Islamic sovereignty. As the communities living in *dār al-ḥarb*

7 See the introductory Chapter 1 of this current volume, by Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, "The Church as Minority in the Context of Islam," who sets out the different possibilities in defining 'minority.'

8 The conquest of Sindh (north-western India) in 712 CE is usually regarded as the first contact of Muslims with the Indian subcontinent. From approximately 1173 until 1750, several Muslim rulers reigned in India until the British took over. For more detail see, for example, Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 391–413; and Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 140–152.

9 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 2.

10 See for example Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7–9; Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), xi–xvi; Adis Duderija and Halim Rane, *Islam and Muslims in the West: Major Issues and Debates* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 221–226.

were, from an Islamic perspective, lacking legal and ethical competence, they were perceived as being in a state of nature. However, even though the *dār al-ḥarb* was perceived as in a state of nature, Islamic rulers and Muslim scholars did not treat it as a no-man's land. The Islamic law of war regulated the hostile relations of *dār al-ḥarb* with *dār al-Islam*, just as the Romans observed the regulations of the *jus fetiale* in their inimical relations with other nations. During the periods of peace, Islamic rulers and Muslim scholars took cognizance of authorities that existed in countries that were not under Islamic control. This cognizance of the need for authorities in the *dār al-ḥarb* did not entail recognition, for recognition would imply Islam's approval of non-Islamic sovereignties as fully-fledged entities under Islamic law. Instead, it meant that some kind of authority was necessary by nature for the survival of humanity. Consequently, if a Muslim entered the abode of war under a safe conduct (*amān*), it was mandatory for them to respect the authorities of that territory and abide by its laws for the time they spent in that territory benefiting from the securities granted to them through a covenant with the Muslim authorities or under a safe conduct. During their period of stay in the *dār al-ḥarb*, the Muslim was obliged to follow their own law, that is, the Islamic law. If there arose a conflict between the Islamic law and that of the *dār al-ḥarb*, the Muslim had to follow the Islamic law, although perhaps in certain cases less strictly.¹¹

Although most scholars have departed from this old binary vision, there are still some Muslim scholars who adhere to this outlook, as we shall see later in this contribution. Some contemporary scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan, have reflected on the appropriate classification of Western liberal democracies. Ramadan comes up with different concepts: *dār al-ahd* (abode of treaty), *dār al-amn* (abode of safety), *dār al-dawa* (abode of invitation to Islam), and *dār al-shahada* (abode of testimony). He points out that both *dār al-dawa* and *dār al-shahada* are appropriate concepts for the West. He concurs with the contemporary scholar Faysal al-Mawlawi who compares the West with Mecca before the Prophet, and the Muslims with those who migrated to Medina. In that period, Muslims were just as they are today in the West, a minority, and the Prophet was calling people to Islam. However, Ramadan prefers the concept *dār al-shahada* for two reasons. First, the Muslim who gives the Islamic testimony of faith is not doing this only for God and humanity, but also does this in an abode of security. The West is thus an area where Muslims can live in security and where they are at home. Secondly, the Islamic testimony goes hand in hand with responsibility. Muslims living in the West have a huge responsibility, as the testimony they give their society is based on faith, values, spirituality, a perception of the boundaries that exist, and a long-term commitment to human and social well-being.¹² In my opinion both concepts of *dār al-dawa* and *dār al-shahada* are correct because Muslims in liberal democracies

11 Majid Khadduri, *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybānī's Siyar*, trans. with an Introduction, Notes, and Appendices by Majid Khadduri (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), 11–14.

12 Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 72–73.

are able to call people to Islam and to actively participate in society. I also agree that the old binary geographical model is outdated and therefore no longer resembles the reality of the spheres of influence and hegemony in culture, civilization, economics, and politics.¹³

Three Hermeneutic Approaches Regarding Muslims in Liberal Democracies

In this section I describe three hermeneutical methodologies taken in addressing the situation of Muslim minorities living in liberal democracies: the puritan, the renewalist, and the traditional approach. These three represent the main streams of thought that have shaped and continue to shape interpretations within Sunni Islam.

The Puritan Approach

The puritan approach is also known as the literal, the puritan-literalist, or *salafiyya* method and is linked to *salafī* Muslim scholars in Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ An example from a puritan approach regarding Muslims residing in non-Muslim lands is the opinion of the contemporary *salafī* scholar Sheikh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid, who runs the well-known website Islam Question & Answer where he answers questions on Islam. On question number 131586, ‘Is their residing in a non-Muslim country regarded as a sin?,’ he gives the following answer.

He starts by pointing out that

undoubtedly living in a Muslim country has a good impact on a person in terms of his obedience to Allah, worship and raising his children, just as living in a non-Muslim country has a bad impact, and may even be destructive sometimes, especially for young people who grow up in that country. Overcoming this impact requires an immense effort, along with good planning, raising children properly, and cooperating with other Muslims there to create a righteous environment in which boys and girls can grow up. It is most unfortunate that moving to Muslim countries is very difficult for many people, because of their own circumstances or because of the situation in those countries and their systems having to do with migration and settlement.¹⁵

13 Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 75–76.

14 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 34; Said Fares Hassan, *Fiqh Al-Aqalliyyat: History, Development, and Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20; Uriya Shavit, *Sharī'a and Muslim Minorities: The Wasafī and Salafī Approaches to Fiqh al-Aqalliyyāt al-Muslima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15–16.

15 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?,” Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.

He then refers to a statement of al-‘Uthaymīn who points out that residing in non-Muslim countries presents significant risks to a Muslim’s religious commitment, morals, behaviour, and etiquette. Observations indicate that individuals who have resided in such environments have often returned with altered beliefs and behaviours. Some have embraced actions contrary to their faith, and a portion have renounced their religious beliefs altogether, displaying disbelief in all forms of religion. The protection of one’s faith necessitates seeking divine refuge. It is observed that some individuals entirely dismiss religious principles and exhibit ridicule towards the faith and its adherents, irrespective of historical context. Consequently, it is imperative, indeed obligatory, to implement preventative measures by establishing certain conditions and guidelines to safeguard against possible moral and spiritual deterioration.¹⁶

At the same time, al-Munajjid acknowledges that whether a Muslim may reside in a non-Muslim country varies from person to person and consequently one cannot jump to conclusions that living in a non-Muslim country is always *harām* (forbidden): ‘Residing in a non-Muslim country may sometimes be permissible, sometimes encouraged (*mustahabb*) and sometimes *harām*, depending on the individual’s situation, the purpose of his residing there, and the extent to which he is able to practise his religion openly.’¹⁷ Al-Munajjid further states that to live in a non-Muslim country, one must meet two essential conditions. As a first condition, the individual should secure their faith and religious commitment by having enough knowledge, faith, and strength to ensure that he or she will remain steadfast in his or her beliefs and will avoid going astray and deviating. The individual should harbour animosity towards the unbelievers and refrain from embracing and accepting them as close friends and allies because loving them and accepting them as close friends and allies are things that go against one’s faith. He refers to the following verses of the Qur’ān to support his view:

You will not find a people who believe in Allah and the Last Day having affection for those who oppose Allah and His Messenger, even if they were their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their kindred.

(Q. 58:22)

O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you – then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people.

16 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?,” Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.

17 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?,” Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.

So you see those in whose hearts is disease hastening into [association with] them, saying, ‘We are afraid a misfortune may strike us.’ But perhaps Allah will bring conquest or a decision from Him, and they will become, over what they have been concealing within themselves, regretful.

(Q. 5:51–52)

Al-Munajjid further underpins this by the following two narrations:

A man will be with those he loves.¹⁸
Whoever loves a people is one of them.¹⁹

Having affection for the enemies of Allah poses a significant threat to a Muslim, as it suggests aligning with them and imitating their ways, or at the very least not speaking out against them.²⁰

The second condition that al-Munajjid stipulates is that an individual must be able to practise their religion openly, indicating the performance of Islamic rituals should face no obstruction. There should be no barriers to conducting prayers, the Friday prayer (*Salat ul-Jumu'ah*), and prayers in a congregation, particularly if there are others who also participate in congregational prayers and establish the Friday prayer. Additionally, the individual should not face restrictions in giving charity (*zakāh*), observing fasting, performing pilgrimage (*Hajj*), and engaging in other rituals and symbols of Islam. Should an individual encounter impossibility in fulfilling these religious practices, it is deemed impermissible for them to continue residing in that locale, thereby making it a requirement to migrate from that environment. According to Ibn Qudāmah (d. 1223), in the context of classifying individuals concerning migration, the first category comprises those for whom migration is deemed obligatory. This pertains to individuals who possess the capacity to migrate and who are unable to practise their religion openly or fulfil the essential obligations of Islam while residing among non-believers. Consequently,

18 Al-Bukhāri, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhāri*, Vol. V, 33–4, *ḥadīth* no. 3688. The complete *ḥadīth* reads as follows:

A man asked the Prophet (ﷺ) about the Hour (i.e. Day of Judgement) saying, ‘When will the Hour be?’ The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘What have you prepared for it?’ The man said, ‘Nothing, except that I love Allah and His Apostle.’ The Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘You will be with those whom you love.’ We had never been so glad as we were on hearing that saying of the Prophet (i.e., ‘You will be with those whom you love.’) Therefore, I love the Prophet, Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, and I hope that I will be with them because of my love for them though my deeds are not similar to theirs.

19 I was unable to trace the *ḥadīth* collection. Moreover, Munajjid does not provide in this *fatwā* the *ḥadīth* collection and the *ḥadīth* number.

20 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?,” Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.

migration becomes mandatory, as Allah, may He be exalted, states (interpretation of the meaning),²¹

Indeed, those whom the angels take [in death] while wronging themselves – [the angels] will say, ‘in what [condition] were you?’ They will say, ‘We were oppressed in the land.’ The angels will say, ‘Was not the earth of Allah spacious [enough] for you to emigrate therein?’ For those, their refuge is Hell – and evil it is as a destination.

(Q. 4:97)

This constitutes a strict admonition, suggesting that migration (*hijra*) is mandatory in this context. Furthermore, the performance of the obligatory duties of Islam is incumbent upon those capable of doing so; migration is indispensable for the fulfilment and completion of these duties. Whatever is essential to the execution of an obligation is, by extension, also mandatory. While referring again to Ibn Qudāmah’s discussion in *al-Mughnī*, al-Munajjid mentions the second category of individuals, in the context of migration, for whom migration is not mandatory. This group includes individuals unable to migrate due to illness, compulsion to remain, or physical weakness. These individuals are exempt from the obligation to migrate, as supported by the declaration of Allah, may He be exalted, wherein it is stated (interpretation of the meaning):

Except for the oppressed among men, women and children who cannot devise a plan nor are they directed to a way.

For those it is expected that Allah will pardon them, and Allah is ever Pardoning and Forgiving.

(Q. 4:98–99)

Thus, migrating is neither deemed commendable (*mustahabb*) nor advisable, due to their inability to perform it.

Finally, al-Munajjid mentions a third category, which pertains to individuals for whom migration is advised, though not mandatory. This encompasses those who possess the ability to migrate but can openly practise their religion while residing in non-Muslim lands. In their situation, it is advised that they migrate to a Muslim land, so they may engage in *jihād*, enhance the demographic presence of Muslims within Muslim territories, provide support to them, prevent the demographic expansion of non-Muslims, and avoid both socializing with and witnessing immoral actions among them. Migration is not mandatory for these individuals, as they are

21 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, “Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?,” Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.; Ibn Qudāmah, *Muwaffaq al-Dīn ‘Abdullah Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī*, al-Mughnī, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattah Muḥammad al-Ḥalū and ‘Abd Allah bin ‘Abd al-Ḥassan al-Turkī, 14 volumes, 3rd ed. (Riyadh: Dar ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1997), 13:149–151.

capable of fulfilling the essential Islamic obligations without migrating.²² Residing to promote Islam is a communal obligation for those able to do so, provided that *da'wah* is possible without obstacles, as calling people to Islam is a religious duty. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) emphasized conveying the message: 'Convey from me, even if it is one verse.' Hence, residing in a country may be permissible or recommended if one can openly practise and preach Islam, one possesses sufficient knowledge to counter doubts, and one chooses friends and enemies for the sake of Allah. However, there is the risk of environmental influence on oneself and one's children. Therefore, cooperation with other Muslims is needed to establish an Islamic centre for learning and spreading Islam.²³

In the previous *fatwā* of al-Munajjid, the word *hijra* or migration is frequently mentioned. The concept of *hijra* is deep-seated in the *salafī* doctrine. The word *hijra* literally means emigration. In the history of Islam, *hijra* refers to an occurrence where Muslims, after being persecuted for 13 years in Mecca, were allowed by God to emigrate to Medina, where they could live safely. At first glance, *hijra* denotes emigration from an unsafe place to a safe place. However, most *salafī* scholars give a broader meaning to *hijra*. The Muslim scholar Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2001) describes *hijra* as 'migrating from the land of *shirk* (idolatry) to the land of Islam.'²⁴ He adds that *hijra* is an obligation upon the Muslim community and it continues until the end of time. One question that arises is, 'What is a land of *shirk*?' Al-'Uthaymīn describes the land of *shirk* as being where the signs displaying *shirk* are upheld and where the signs of Islam, such as prayer in the congregation, the *adhān* (call to prayer), the *Eid* prayers, and the Friday prayers (*jumu'ah*) are not universally and commonly established.²⁵ This description is quite vague, but it seems that he equates the land of *shirk* with the land of unbelievers. Furthermore, he points out that a Muslim minority who establish the signs of Islam cannot transform the status from land of unbelief to the land of Islam. As long as the majority of a country is non-Muslim, such a country remains a land of unbelief or *shirk*. He further states it is obligatory upon every Muslim to perform

22 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, "Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?," Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>; Ibn Qudāmah, *Muwaffaq al-Dīn 'Abdullah Ibn Aḥmad Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī*, al-Mughnī, ed. 'Abd al-Fattah Muḥammad al-Ḥalū and 'Abd Allah bin 'Abd al-Ḥassan al-Turkī, 14 volumes, 3rd ed. (Riyadh: Dar 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1997), 151.

23 Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid, "Question 131586: Is Their Residing in a Non-Muslim Country Regarded as a Sin?," Islam Question & Answer, 23 September 2021, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/131586/is-their-residing-in-a-non-muslim-country-regarded-as-a-sin>.

24 Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, *Explanation of the Three Fundamental Principles of Islaam*, ed. Fahd ibn Naasir ibn Ibraaheem as Sulaymaan, trans. Abou Talhah Daawood ibn Ronald Burbank (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1997), 208.

25 Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, *Explanation of the Three Fundamental Principles of Islaam*, ed. Fahd ibn Naasir ibn Ibraaheem as Sulaymaan, trans. Abou Talhah Daawood ibn Ronald Burbank (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1997), 208.

hijra who is unable to practise their religion in the land of unbelief. According to al-‘Uthaymīn, the following verse of the Qur’ān acts as a proof for *hijra*:²⁶

Those believers who stay at home – except those with valid excuses – are not equal to those who strive in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Allah has elevated in rank those who strive with their wealth and their lives above those who stay behind [with valid excuses]. Allah has promised each a fine reward, but those who strive will receive a far better reward than others – far superior ranks, forgiveness, and mercy from Him. And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Except helpless men, women, and children who cannot afford a way out – it is right to hope that Allah will pardon them. For Allah is Ever-Pardoning, All-Forgiving.²⁷

(Q. 4:95)

This verse contains, according to al-‘Uthaymīn, a proof that those who are able to perform *hijra*, but do not even though they are capable of doing so, will be chastized by the angels who will seize their souls and say to them, ‘Was not the earth of Allah spacious [enough] for you to emigrate therein?’²⁸ The weak ones who are unable to migrate, Allah has pardoned, because ‘Allah does not place a burden on any soul greater than it can bear.’²⁹

The opinions of both al-Munajjid and al-‘Uthaymīn make it clear that generally speaking, living in non-Muslim lands is highly undesirable according to the puritan approach. Only if certain conditions are fulfilled is it permissible to reside in the land of unbelievers. But even if those conditions are met, according to these scholars, it is much better to perform *hijra*. This indicates that scholars who hold this opinion still view the world binarily: the land of unbelief and the land of Islam. This binary view is contrary to Muslim scholars who can be placed in the category of the renewalist approach, which I discuss in the next section.

26 Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn, *Explanation of the Three Fundamental Principles of Islaam*, ed. Fahd ibn Naasir ibn Ibraaheem as Sulaymaan, trans. Abou Talhah Daawood ibn Ronald Burbank (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1997), 209.

27 Translation by Dr. Mustafa Khattab, The Clear Qur’an, <https://quran.com/4> (accessed 27 August 2025). Here Khattab adds that:

this verse refers to some of those who had accepted Islam secretly in Mecca but refused to emigrate to Medina along with the rest of the believers. Some of them were killed in the Battle of Badr when they were rallied by the Meccans to fight against the Muslims. The verse also applies to any Muslim who accepts abuse and refuses to move to another place where they can live with dignity and practice their faith freely.

28 Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn, *Explanation of the Three Fundamental Principles of Islaam*, ed. Fahd ibn Naasir ibn Ibraaheem as Sulaymaan, trans. Abou Talhah Daawood ibn Ronald Burbank (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1997), 209.

29 Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-‘Uthaymīn, *Explanation of the Three Fundamental Principles of Islaam*, ed. Fahd ibn Naasir ibn Ibraaheem as Sulaymaan, trans. Abou Talhah Daawood ibn Ronald Burbank (Birmingham: al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1997), 209.

The Renewalist Approach: Fiqh al-aqallīyāt

The hermeneutic approach I shall now engage with is the renewalist approach, sometimes also referred to as the liberal or modernist perspective.³⁰ As Amjad M. Mohammed points out, when interpreting the source texts such as the Qur'ān and the sunna, this approach takes modern practices into consideration. Consequently, it derives principles and rulings predicated on a more contextual framework or diminishes those existing Islamic practices that are no longer compatible with modern practices.³¹ Although there are different individuals and groups who adopt this approach, I will mainly focus on the subject of *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* or the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities. The term *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* was coined by the late scholar Taha Jābir Al-Alwani (d. 2016). Born in Iraq, he migrated to the United States in 1984 where he established the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS) in Leesburg, Virginia. He served as the president of GSISS and held the prestigious Imam Al-Shafi'i Chair in Islamic Legal Theory. Additionally, Al-Alwani held the position of president at both the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Herndon, Virginia, and the Fiqh Council of North America.³² Another scholar who is often associated with *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* is Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022). Both Al-Alwani and al-Qaraḍāwī were key figures respectively in the International Institute of Islamic Thought and the European Council for Fatwa and Research.³³

In his book *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections*,³⁴ Al-Alwani points out that historically, Muslim minorities were so marginal and isolated that they lacked the capacity to form independent economic, legal, or cultural organizations and institutions. Muslim jurists and 'ulamā' were acutely aware of the significant differences between the challenges faced by Muslim individuals and groups in non-Muslim societies, as opposed to those faced by a Muslim community governed by Islamic law, systems, and traditions. They acknowledged the disparities between the legal sources in Muslim regions and those in other societies. They comprehended how cultural, psychological, intellectual, and juristic variances influenced life in these distinct environments, thus compelling *muftis* (a *mufti* is a scholar responsible for answering a question and thus issuing a *fatwā*), whether students or scholars, to examine the evidence for answering the questions of Muslims (which is tantamount to issuing Islamic verdicts or *fatwas*). It was essential for them to contextualize that evidence concerning the prevailing circumstances in

30 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 37.

31 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 37.

32 "Dr. Taha Jabir Alalwani," International Institute of Islamic Thought, <https://iiit.org/en/dr-taha-jabir-alalwani/> (accessed 24 October 2024).

33 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 37.

34 Taha Jābir Al-Alwani, *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010).

order to issue appropriate *fatwas* that could be conveniently and suitably applicable to their time and location, while still adhering to the core principles and overarching objectives of the *sharīʿa*. Consequently, the demand for a new jurisprudential framework for minorities is more pronounced in contemporary times than it was historically. Historically, the ‘reference community’ was only found in its home country and there was only minimal movement to new lands. The casual, transient nature of such limited migration did not interest jurists for legislation or *fatwas*, leading its *fiqh* being called ‘crises’ or ‘emergency’ *fiqh*. However, in the present world of globalization, such an approach is untenable and there is a strong need for a legal framework for Muslim minorities.³⁵ Al-Alwani underlines that when addressing enquiries related to minorities; it is imperative for contemporary *fiqh* practitioners or *muftis* to recognize the complexity of the situation they are engaging with, which extends beyond the simplistic scenario of an individual merely seeking an Islamic ruling on a personal issue, and a scholar perceiving their role solely as the issuer of a *fatwā*.

Such an approach is marked by a lack of scientific rigour and is a residual practice from a period characterized by strict adherence to established doctrine (*taqlīd*), which was often perpetuated by less educated members of the community who found it convenient to imitate and follow their teachers and predecessors. In the present context, there is a need for a more rational and methodical approach that thoroughly examines the context of both the enquiry and the enquirer. This approach must also carefully consider the social factors that have prompted the question. There arises a need to assess whether the enquiry is appropriately framed or if it ought to be restructured and addressed as a *fiqh* issue within a holistic framework that incorporates fundamental *sharīʿa* principles, guiding Qurʾānic values, overarching moral frameworks, and the fundamental objectives underpinning Islamic jurisprudence.³⁶ This criticism regarding traditional *fiqh* and *taqlīd* is also echoed by al-Qaraḏāwī, who states that it is important for a contemporary *mufti* to take the people out from the prison (*sijn*) of following a traditional school of law to the vastness of the *sharīʿa*.³⁷

In stark contrast to the puritan approach, both Al-Alwani and al-Qaraḏāwī argue that the West is not a place forbidden to live for a Muslim, let alone the dichotomy of *dār al-Islam*, *dār al-kufr* or *dār al-ḥarb* being still applicable. Al-Alwani states, ‘the Muslim Ummah’s role is not limited by land or confined in space. It has to reach out to others to convey the message of God. Thus, all references to *dār al-kufr* or *dār al-Islam* or *dār al-ḥarb*, as geographical entities, become superfluous

35 Taha Jābir Al-Alwani, *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), xiv–xv.

36 Taha Jābir Al-Alwani, *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 4.

37 Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaṭ al-Mujtamaʿāt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 57.

and restrictive.³⁸ Al-Qaraḍāwī goes one step further and points out that it is an obligation for Muslims to live in Western countries:

Muslims – as a nation with a universal mission – must have an Islamic presence of influence, in Western countries, as the West has come to lead the world. It guides its policy, economy and culture. That is a fact we cannot deny. If Islam does not exist there, Muslims must act in solidarity to establish such a presence, preserving the original Muslims in their homes, supporting their moral and spiritual entity, caring for those who enter Islam, receiving Muslim arrivals and providing them with the necessary guidance, analysis and education. In addition to spreading Islamic invitation among non-Muslims.³⁹

Another point of critique that both Al-Alwani and al-Qaraḍāwī have is that they deem classical Islamic law inadequate because one of the two primary source texts for Islamic jurisprudence is the corpus of *aḥādīth*, which is connected to a different context and time and therefore no longer valid.⁴⁰ Al-Qaraḍāwī points out that the *sharīʿa* is binding on every Muslim, wherever they are and in whatever era they live. Hence, Muslims in the West or the East, in the Islamic homeland or in countries ruled by Islam or ruled by secularism, are commanded to apply the *sharīʿa* in their lives to the extent of their ability, as the *sharīʿa* itself decides. No Muslim is so far outside the scope of the *sharīʿa* that they can say, 'I am exempt from the provisions of the *sharīʿa* and the costs of religion,' unless the *sharīʿa* itself exempts them according to its principles, rules, and judgements and evidence. At the same time, the *sharīʿa* takes into consideration the abilities, circumstances, and needs of each person. It does not want difficulty for that person, does not cause them any inconvenience in religion and does not burden them with a trial they cannot bear. Therefore, it is not surprising that *fatwas* of this *sharīʿa* serve in accordance with the change of the circumstances and take the discomfort away from people. It is for this reason, al-Qaraḍāwī expounds, that it is necessary to do research regarding the position of Muslim minorities.⁴¹ According to al-Qaraḍāwī, minority jurisprudence is built on nine pillars: (1) no jurisprudence without sound modern *ijtihād* (independent reasoning by a Muslim scholar); (2) adherence to the comprehensive jurisprudential ground rules; (3) focus on jurisprudence with an eye on reality; (4) focusing on the jurisprudence of the group, not just individuals; (5) adopting the approach of facilitation (*taysīr*); (6) adherence to the ground rule that 'a *fatwā* changes as the circumstances change;' (7) taking into account the tradition (*sunna*)

38 Taha Jābir Al-Alwani, *Towards a Fiqh of Minorities: Some Basic Reflections* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 28.

39 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaʿ al-Mujtamaʿāt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 33.

40 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 38.

41 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaʿ al-Mujtamaʿāt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 13–14.

of gradualism; (8) recognizing human necessities and needs; and (9) being free of strict adherence to a school of law (*madhhab*).⁴² Regarding this last point of letting go of following a school of law, al-Qaraḍāwī argues that this is vital for minority jurisprudence. In some cases, a certain school of law is strict in the matter while other schools of law are much more lenient. Not being bound to one particular school of law can be beneficial for Muslim minorities, especially if the evidence for the lenient opinion is sound.⁴³ However, the approach of not adhering to a school of law is not supported by some Muslim scholars, as I will present in the next section. There we will see that there are some similarities regarding the nine pillars on which the minority jurisprudence is built according to al-Qaraḍāwī. Finally, al-Qaraḍāwī gives numerous examples of how *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* is helpful for Muslims living in the West, such as combining the sunset prayer with the night prayer during the long summer days to avoid hardship,⁴⁴ and the permissibility of purchasing a house with an interest-based mortgage (as dealing with interest is prohibited in Islam).⁴⁵

The Traditional Approach

An important study regarding the traditional approach in Sunni Islam is Amjad Mohammad's *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A Legal Study with Applications* (2013). In his book, Mohammed endeavours to point out that traditional Islamic law, interpreted by the ḥanafī school of law (*al-madhhab al-ḥanafī*), is capable of adapting to different situations and times. As such, it has the means to facilitate Muslims living in liberal democracies while simultaneously remaining true to their faith. Although Mohammed acknowledged that the ḥanafī school of law is only one of the traditional schools of law in Sunni Islam and he could have chosen another, he selected the ḥanafī school of law because it has the most adherents. This school of law is named after its founder Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nu'mān ibn Thābit (d. 767 CE). Abū Ḥanīfah devoted a substantial number of years to studying Islamic Theology (*'ilm al-kalām*) and *fiqh*. It is highly debatable whether Abū Ḥanīfah authored any books, but his students did write books which contain notes or dictations written down during the classes he gave. Abū Ḥanīfah had some prominent students who had a significant impact in the establishment, development, and spread of the ḥanafī school of law: namely, Zufar Ibn Hudhail Al-Kūfī (d. 775 CE), 'Abū-Yūsuf Ya'qūb Ibn-Ibrāhīm (d. 798 CE), and Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 805 CE). Al-Shaybānī wrote the famous work *Zāhir al-Riwāyah* (*The Clear*

42 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaṭ al-Mujtama'āt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 40–60.

43 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaṭ al-Mujtama'āt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 57.

44 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaṭ al-Mujtama'āt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 77–79.

45 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Aqallīyāt al-Muslimah: Hayāt al-Muslimīn Wasaṭ al-Mujtama'āt al-Ukhra* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001), 154–191.

Transmission), sometimes also known *Zāhir al-Uṣūl* or *Zāhir al-Madhhab*. This work contains all the *masā'il* (legal opinions) associated with Abū Ḥanīfah, Abū-Yūsuf, and Muḥammad al-Shaybānī and is as such the primary source of the ḥanafī school of law. The second rank of the *masā'il* are the legal opinions found in works other than the *Zāhir al-Riwāyah*, such as other works of Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī. Works dictated by the founding scholars of the ḥanafī school of law and subsequently transcribed by their students and which are named *al-Nawādir*, also belong to this category. The third rank of the *masā'il* are called *al-wāqī'āt* and are composed by the associates of al-Shaybānī or the associates of his associates. Some of these books contain *fatāwā* (legal edicts) of qualified scholars (*mujtahidūn*). In the course of time, these *fatāwā* became increasingly important to a point that they became a substantial part of the fundamental texts in the ḥanafī school of law. For example, the famous scholar Ibn 'Ābidīn (d. 1836) leaned heavily on this *fatwā* literature in his renowned book *ḥāshiya 'alā radd al-muḥtār*.⁴⁶

This development is highly relevant for our topic, as I shall now elaborate. Due to the changing circumstances of societies, the later ḥanafī scholars held different opinions to the earlier scholars of this school of law. Later ḥanafī scholars acknowledged that when a question is posed, the *mufti* must consider the circumstances of the questioner. Furthermore, evolving conditions warrant the modification of certain rules to align them with the societal needs at hand. Certain ḥanafī scholars assert that, over time, the texts have not only been modified but have also been rectified (*ṣaḥḥaḥa*) by the principal scholars of the ḥanafī school of law in response to evolving circumstances or shifts in the condition of the populace. Besides this method of rectifying, which is known as *taṣḥīḥ*, there is another method, *tarjīḥ*, that has been introduced for the same purpose; it serves as a method for prioritizing a perspective when multiple seemingly conflicting viewpoints are present. Although sometimes argument is levelled against scholars who today come up with an answer that is different from former scholars, in particular from the founding scholars of the ḥanafī school, and thereby deviating from authoritative position or sources of the ḥanafī school, this critique is incorrect. Both *taṣḥīḥ* and *tarjīḥ* demonstrate that the ḥanafī school acknowledges the feasibility of change and set methods to accomplish this. As a result, novel rulings should not be interpreted as contravening the principles of the ḥanafī school nor as diverging from opinions that are legally sound and widely endorsed. With changing medical, technological, and social developments, along with the changes in political and social systems, Muslims face unprecedented situations.

In numerous instances, the texts of Islamic jurisprudence do not address these contemporary circumstances. This realm falls under *ijtihād*.⁴⁷ In its broadest sense, *ijtihād* involves the optimal employment of human intellect to elucidate and expound

46 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 56–58.

47 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 58–59.

upon the sharī‘a. This encompasses a range of spiritual methodologies, including the exegesis of Qur’ānic texts and the evaluation of the authenticity of the *ḥadīth*. *Qiyās*, or analogical reasoning, represents a particular form of *ijtihād*, a method by which the principles delineated in the Qur’ān, sunna, and *ijmā’* are extrapolated and applied to derive solutions for novel issues that have not been expressly addressed.⁴⁸ *Ijtihād*, or the independent reasoning undertaken by Muslim scholars, is substantiated by the Qur’ān⁴⁹ and the sunna.⁵⁰ The opposite of *ijtihād* is *taqlīd*, which literally means blind imitation and in the context of *fiqh* refers to adhering to the rules of one of the schools of law.⁵¹ However, if a Muslim scholar cannot find the answer in the school of law to which they adhere (in our case the ḥanafī school), the scholar can employ *ijtihād*, while following the methodology of the related school.⁵² To demonstrate how the ḥanafī school of law can help Muslims who want to be true to their faith while living in Western countries, we look to the practical examples of two well-recognized prohibitions in Islamic law: the proscription of alcohol and the proscription of usury, also known as interest (*ribā*). Regarding alcohol, the majority of scholars hold that it is not only illegal for a Muslim to consume alcohol, but it is also forbidden for him to sell it or even to transport it for a non-Muslim as it falls under the heading of assisting others into sin. However, Ibn ‘Ābidīn states that merely transporting alcohol is not a sin, because according to Abū Ḥanīfah one does not know for what purpose it has been bought. It may be to transform it into vinegar or just for disposal. According to Mohammed, such an approach forms a leeway for Muslims who work in supermarkets where alcohol is being sold. In a similar way, a Muslim can work in a conventional bank that deals

48 Doi, Abdur Rahman I., *Shariah: The Islamic Law* (London: TaHa Publishers, 1984), 78.

49 See, e.g., Q. 2:150; 4:83, 105.

50 The renowned *ḥadīth* attributed to the companion Mu’ādh bin Jabal (d. 639) is frequently cited as evidence supporting the concept of *ijtihād*: When the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) intended to send Mu’ādh ibn Jabal to Yemen, he asked: How will you judge when the occasion of deciding a case arises? He replied: I shall judge in accordance with Allah’s Book. He asked: (What will you do) if you do not find guidance in Allah’s Book? He replied: (I will act) in accordance with the *Sunnah* of the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him). He asked: (What will you do) if you do not find guidance in the *Sunnah* of the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) and in Allah’s Book? He replied: I shall do my best to form an opinion and I spare no pains. The Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) then patted him on the breast and said: Praise be to Allah Who has helped the messenger of the Apostle of Allah to find a thing which pleases the Apostle of Allah. See Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, English Translation with Explanatory Notes by Ahmad Hasan, New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990, Reprinted 2003, vol. III, 1019 *ḥadīth* no. 3585. Another *ḥadīth* often used as evidence for *ijtihād* is as follows: If a ruler/judge passes a judgement having exerted himself to arrive at what is correct, and he is indeed correct, he will have two rewards. If he passes judgement having exerted himself to arrive at what is correct, but it is incorrect, he will have one reward. See “Sunan Abi Dawud 3574: The Office of the Judge (Kitab Al-Aqdiyah),” Sunnah.com, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3574> and Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan*, t vol. III, 1013 *ḥadīth* no. 3567.

51 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 60.

52 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 70.

with interest on the condition that the Muslim employee is not directly involved in usurious transactions.⁵³ Notwithstanding the above, Mohammed notes that God consciousness (*taqwa*) requires a Muslim to avoid dealing with usury, alcohol, and other prohibited products as far as possible.⁵⁴ Thus, although the theoretical framework of the traditional approach based on the ḥanafī *madhhab* may appear promising, it remains questionable whether Muslims will adopt this approach, as it could engender a moral dilemma.

Conclusion

The permanent settlement of many Muslims in Western liberal democracies has led them to search for answers on how to live in such countries while remaining true to their religion. From the three hermeneutical approaches in Sunni Islam, the puritan approach is the least in favour of letting Muslims reside in non-Muslim countries. Muslim scholars adhering to this approach encourage Muslims living in non-Muslim countries to make *hijra*: returning to Islamic countries where they can live in an Islamic environment. According to this approach, Muslims living as a minority have no concessions regarding their religion and, as such, they hold the same obligations and prohibitions as Muslims living in Islamic countries. The renewalist approach takes a diametrical position and allows Muslims to live in non-Muslim countries, including Western liberal states. Some of the pillars proposed by al-Qaraḍāwī on which minority jurisprudence should be built appear to have an overlap with the traditional approach as envisaged by the ḥanafī school of law. Both approaches demonstrate a high level of flexibility for Muslims living as minorities, enabling these Muslims to remain true to their faith. It is conceivable that in practice, Western Muslims adopt, consciously or unconsciously, elements of all three hermeneutical approaches. Some will opt to make *hijra*, while others will purchase a house with an interest-based mortgage after consulting an Islamic scholar who follows the method of *fiqh al-aqallīyāt*. The hermeneutic approach, or the elements of it that are adhered to, is likely influenced by the context in which Western Muslims reside. For instance, the majority of the British Muslim population has its origins in the Indian subcontinent, with most adhering to the ḥanafī school of law. Therefore, it is anticipated that the majority of British Muslims adopt the traditional approach interpreted by the ḥanafī school of law in addressing their queries and issues.

53 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 149–153.

54 Amjad M. Mohammed, *Muslims in Non-Muslim Lands: A legal Study with Applications* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2013), 152.

13 Redemptive Suffering and Sectarian Hostility

Shi'i Islam as a Minority Faith

Ahab Bdaiwi

Abstract

This contribution examines the historical and theological construction of minority identity in Shi'i Islam within the broader Muslim world. It traces how political marginalization, sectarian polemics, and cultural memory, especially the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn at Karbala, shaped Shi'i self-perception as both oppressed and spiritually distinct. The analysis explores doctrinal themes such as redemptive suffering, tribulation as divine favour, and exegetical exclusivity vested in the Ahl al-Bayt. It also interrogates Sunni polemics, particularly those rooted in Ibn Taymiyyah's writings, as mechanisms of exclusion and minoritization. While acknowledging episodes where Shi'is reversed roles as majority oppressors, the contribution underscores Shi'ism's resilience, theological creativity, and ability to transform marginalization into a source of communal solidarity, moral virtue, and eschatological hope.

Keywords: Shi'i Islam, polemics, oppression, sectarianism, suffering

Introduction

The aim of the present contribution is to critically reflect on historical epochs and theological concepts that have shaped Shi'i perceptions and self-perception of being a minority within Islam. The contribution does not attempt to offer new, historically critical revaluations of Shi'i doctrine and history. Instead, it seeks to provide theological and reflective insights into the principal tenets of one of Islam's minority traditions.¹ The following sections will address popular Muslim

1 The religious and intellectual history of Islam witnessed a great many attacks and accusations of unbelief (known as *takfir* in Islamic parlance) against Shi'i Islam. While there are too many examples to recount, the following cases are representative of the medieval and modern milieus. On the general history and case studies of *takfir* in medieval and modern Islam, see Camila Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke, eds., *Accusations of Unbelief: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2016). Perhaps the most austere theological condemnations of Shi'ism were by the controversial Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328). See Tariq Al-Jamil, "Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Mutahar al-Hilli: Shi'i Polemics and the Struggle for Religious Author-

polemics against the Shi'ah and examine selected case studies found in widely circulated texts and polemical writings. The contribution will go on to argue that Shi'ism has undergone a protracted process of minoritization by Sunni Islam from the formative period to the present. It will show how Shi'i Muslims have employed various strategies to navigate external pressures and internal transformations – both of which have shaped their identity as a minority within Islam. The contribution seeks a nuanced historical and theological engagement with representative examples. The analysis will focus primarily on the most prominent expressions of Shi'ism – Twelver Shi'ism, also known as Imāmī Shi'ism.

Shi'i Islam

To be Shi'i, we read in the medieval and modern creeds of Shi'ism, is to profess the testimony that *there is no god except God and that Muḥammad is the messenger of God*.² For the Shi'i faithful, the teachings of the Messenger of God, known as the *sunna*, were preserved, protected, and interpreted soundly by the Household of Muḥammad, known as the Ahl al-Bayt. The truth of the matter, however, is far more complicated. The prevalent view among early Islamic historians who work on Shi'ism is that like all religious traditions and schools of thought in Islam, confessional narratives pertaining to the beginnings of Shi'ism are usually embellished with anachronisms and simplistic historical retellings which ignore nuances and other factors. More often than not, the purported (Sunni and Shi'i) *ḥadīth* of the seventh century were back projections, forged, or mutations from earlier expressions or dictums. For academic historians, they serve as windows in the later periods from which they purport to report back to the time of the Prophet.³ For instance, while it is indeed the case that the early Shi'ahs stood out for their devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt whom later Shi'ahs saw as infallible and inerrant, the sources, however, suggest a different picture. Some early Shi'ahs did not regard the Ahl al-Bayt as infallible, nor did they see them as final authorities beyond dispute.

ity in Medieval Islam,” in *(Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 229–246; Nebil Husayn, *Opposing the Imam: The Legacy of the Nawāṣib in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 112–160.

2 For a brief, academic introduction to the history and beliefs of Shi'i Islam, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet, *What is Shi'i Islam? An Introduction*, trans. K. Casler and E. Ormsby (London: Routledge, 2004). As one can expect, Shi'i Twelver creeds are many in number. However, the standard medieval creed, which received over 20 commentaries, is *al-Bāb al-Ḥādī 'Ashar* by Ibn Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī (d. 1325), usually printed along with the commentary of al-Miqdād al-Suyūrī (d. 1422). See *al-Nāfi' Yawm al-Ḥashr fī Sharḥ al-Bāb al-Ḥādī 'Ashar*, ed. M al-Zaydī (Baghdad: Mu'assasat al-Rāfid, 2012). The authoritative and widely studied Shi'i creed in the modern seminaries is Muḥammad Ridā al-Muẓaffar, *'Aqā'id al-Imāmiyyah* (Najaf: Maktabat al-Amīn, 1968). A more recent creed, written by a leading luminary of the Shi'i seminary, is Ja'far al-Subḥānī, *Doctrines of Shi'i Islam: A Compendium of Imami Beliefs and Practices*, ed. and trans. R.S. Kazemi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

3 For a summary of orientalist and academic studies and attitudes towards *ḥadīth*, see the 'origins and development' section in Harlad Motzki, *Ḥadīth* (London: Routledge, 2016), xiii–liii.

Moreover, the factional divisions among the Ahl al-Bayt themselves were numerous and speak of internal disagreements among different contenders as to who had the right to lead the Family of Muḥammad after his death.⁴ Moreover, the historical veracity of Shi'ī teachings and *ḥadīth* purporting to trace back to the Prophet Muḥammad is as contested as it is in Sunnism. Like its counterparts, Shi'ī *ḥadīth* was subjected to forgeries, inventions, and tendential shaping.⁵

Soon after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632 CE, rents began to emerge in the nascent Muslim community. Among the theological tendencies, political factions, and legal circles that grew into organized traditions and movements in subsequent centuries, Shi'ī Islam considers itself the oldest and most continuous.⁶ The Shi'ah were those members of the Muslim community who gravitated around the Prophet Muḥammad and his household. The largest group among the Shi'ah today, as well as historically, are the Twelvers (*al-ithnā 'ashariyyah*, or the *imāmiyyah*), who believe in a line of 12 imams as the designated successors and teachers after

4 See Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1993). Even among later Shi'ī theologians, after the major occultation period, the doctrine of infallibility was contested if not rejected entirely. In the view of those who uphold such a position, the rejection of infallibility renders the Ahl al-Bayt as pious scholars like any other in early Islamic history. See the detailed study by contemporary Iranian Shi'ī theologian and jurist Muḥsin Kadīvār who discusses medieval Shi'ī theologians such as Ibn al-Ghaḍā'irī (d. 1059) who did not accept the doctrine of infallibility. Muḥsin Kadīvār, *al-Qirā'ah al-Mansiyyah: I'ādat Qirā'at Naẓīyyat al-A'imma al-Ithnā 'Ashar 'Ulemā' Abrār* [The Forgotten Doctrine: Revisiting the Doctrine that the Twelve Imams were Pious Scholars], trans. Sa'd Rastom (Beirut: al-Intishār al-'Arabī, 2011). On the doctrine of infallibility, 'isma in Arabic, see W. Madelung and E. Tayan, "Isma," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 2, ed. P.J. Pearman [online edition].

5 Western studies on Shi'ī *ḥadīth* remain few and far between. While we have yet to receive definitive studies, the following works have made significant contributions to the field, despite their brevity. See Etan Kohlberg, "Shī'ī Ḥadīth," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 1, ed. A.F.L. Beeston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 299–307; Etan Kohlberg, "Introduction: Shi'ī Hadith," in *The Study of Shi'ī Islam*, ed. F. Daftary and G. Miskinzoda (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 165–179; A. Kazemi-Moussavi, "Hadith in Shi'ism," *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hadith-ii/> (accessed 4 July 2025). More recently, Kumail Rajani has moved the debate in a different direction to offer a more robust, case-study analysis on the nature of early Shi'ī *ḥadīth* sources. See Kumail Rajani, "Between Qum and Qayrawān: Unearthing early Shi'ī ḥadīth sources," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 84 (2021): 1–24.

6 On early Shi'ism, see Najam Haider, *The Origins of the Shī'a: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kūfa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte der religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam, Band I* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 233–403; Maria Dakake, *Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 2007); Sean Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Saba' and the Origins of Shi'ism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1994). Academic research on the origins of Sunnism is still developing. For more recent studies, see Mushegh Asatryan, "The Emergence of Sunnism: When the Sunnis Become a Sect?," forthcoming; Ahmad Khan, *Heresy and the Formation of Medieval Islamic Orthodoxy: The Making of Sunnism, from the Eighth to the Eleventh Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). See also Ahab Bdaivi, "The Origins of Sunnism," *Leiden University Arabic Humanities Blog* (March 2003), <https://www.leidenarabichumanitiesblog.nl/articles/the-origins-of-sunnism>.

the Prophet, whom the Shi'ah faithful take as guides and masters in the religious and worldly realm.⁷ In the proceeding decades and centuries after the death of Muḥammad, the imams of the Ahl al-Bayt became targets of hostile Muslim rulers who tolerated little dissent, none more so than the Umayyads and 'Abbasids, and other belligerent factional groups who violently put down religious opposition. From 'Alī b. Abī Tālib (killed in 661 CE), the first imam,⁸ to Ḥasan al-'Askarī (killed in 874 CE), the eleventh imam, each and every imam of the Ahl al-Bayt, as well as prominent leaders of the Shi'ah community, was either silenced, maligned, marginalized, imprisoned, or, as was the case with 11 of the 12 imams, killed by poison or assassinated.⁹

As early as the first Islamic century, the memory of the Ahl al-Bayt was recorded in history books, preserved in *ḥadīth* collections, and commemorated in devotional rituals of mourning and communal gatherings.¹⁰ According to orientalist perspectives, by the second Islamic century, sectarian attitudes started to take firm shape and soon, in the decades that followed, Muslim scholarship knew sectarian biases and prejudicial mentalities.¹¹ In Shi'i historical memory, traces of the Ahl al-Bayt were either suppressed or censored from *ḥadīth* collections, mischaracterized in historical writings, discarded from theological deliberations, and their spiritual teachings, as claimed by the Shi'ah, appropriated by the authorities of the Muslim multitudes.¹²

Shi'i cultural and religious narratives maintain that oppression against the Shi'ah multitudes continued in the centuries that followed, right until the present day.

Shi'ism as Minority

Shi'i Muslims have been an oppressed minority since the earliest days of Islam – at least according to the historical memory of the Shi'i community itself. The history

7 While Shi'ism is broadly divided into Twelvers, Zaydīs, and Ismā'ilīs, the focus of this contribution is the Twelvers.

8 On the centrality of 'Alī in the Shi'i tradition, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Alī, le secret bien gardé: figures du premier Maître en spiritualité shi'ite* (Paris: CNRS Edition, 2020).

9 On the 12 imāms of Shi'ism, see Matthew Pierce, *Twelve Infallible Men: The Imams and the Making of Shi'ism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

10 On the collection and transmission of texts and traditions in early Shi'ism, one may consult the following medieval catalogues. Abū Ja'far al-Tūsī (d. 1067), *al-Fihrist*, ed. J. al-Qayyūmī (Qum: Mu'assasat Nashr al-Faqāha, 1996) and Ibn Shahrāshūb (d. 1192), *Ma'ālim al-'Ulamā' fī Fihrist Kutub al-Shi'ah wa 'asmā' al-muṣannifīn qadīman wa ḥadīthan* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā', 1990). The latter work is an addendum to the former. For a modern critical study, see Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shi'ite Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).

11 See, for example, Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Adam Gaiser, *Sectarianism in Islam: The Ummah Divided* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

12 For example, many Shi'i scholars contend that much of Sunni spirituality, typically known as Sufism, is a borrowing of the spiritual teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt. See, for example, Muṣṭafā Kāmil al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣilah bayn al-Taṣawwuf wa l-Tashayyu'* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2011). For a comparative study, see Shayesteh Gofrani, *Walāya in the formative period of Shi'ism and Sufism: A Comparative Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

of Shi'i Islam knows many episodes of political persecution by ruling elites, alongside intellectual exclusion and accusations of heresy purveyed by the scholarly class.¹³ The key point to be made in this present contribution is the stipulation that a minority is not just weakness – on the contrary, for Shi'i Muslims it went on to catalyze theological creativity and eschatological hope. The rational and philosophical heritage of Islam, both historically and today, has been enriched by the contributions of Shi'i philosophers, mystics, and theologians, whose works have long served as foundational canons in the study of what Muslim scholarship calls *al-'ulūm al-'aqliyyah*, the rational disciplines.¹⁴ Today, Shi'i Muslims form a significant and visible minority within Islam, second to the largest group, Sunni Muslims.

To speak of Shi'i Islam as a minority tradition is not merely to point out that Shi'is are numerically fewer than Sunnis. More significantly, it refers to minoritization as a process of negative evaluation, whereby a group becomes a minority after efforts to suppress and exclude them by the majority. Judged by this criterion, Shi'i Islam, both as a *modus vivendi* and a religious tradition, has long been a minority with real and perceived grievances against dominant religious cultures and political powers.¹⁵

Students of Shi'i Islam would seldom dispute that Shi'ism has almost always had an idiosyncratic character, as well as distinct intellectual expressions, spiritual vistas, historical memories, and political episodes that stand in contradistinction to the worldviews of the broader Sunni communities. That distinctiveness is closely intertwined with the beliefs and praxis of a community acutely aware that it is neither part of the *hoi polloi* of Islam nor aligns with the *communis opinio* proffered

13 See the broad survey, Rasūl Ja'faryān, *Ḥayāt-i Fikrī Siyāsī-i Imāmān-i Shī'ah* (Tehran: Chāp-i Duvvum, 2012).

14 Since medieval times until the present, Shi'i Muslim authors have tried to bring attention to the Shi'i contributions to Islamic learning. When in 1899 the Lebanese literati and historian Jurjī Zaydān (d. 1914) published a four-volume work on the history of Arabic and Islamic literature and learning, he omitted mention of Shi'i authors, arguing that Shi'i scholars played an insignificant role in the making of Islamic civilization. Three prominent Shi'i scholars and seminarians decided to refute his claims. They were Ḥasan al-Ṣadr (d. 1935), Āqā Buzurg Ṭihrānī (d. 1970), and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭā' (d. 1954). Ḥasan al-Ṣadr in two works (or recensions) relies on medieval Arabic bio-bibliographical literature to argue that the Shi'i Muslims were at the forefront and pioneers of the various disciplines of Islamic learning. See Al-Ṣadr, *Ta'sīs al-Shī'ah li 'Ulūm al-Islām* [The Shi'ah as the Pioneers of Islamic Learning] (Baghdad: Markaz al-Nashr wa l-Tibā'ah al-'Irāqīyah al-Mahdūdah, 1951) and al-Ṣadr, *al-Shī'ah wa funūn al-Islām* [The Shi'ah and Learned Disciplines of Islam] (Sayda: Maṭba'at al-'Irfān, 1912). Similarly, Ṭihrānī published two works, one of 25 volumes and the other of 17. The bigger work contains 25,000 entries and 15,000 pages recounting works by Shi'i on all disciplines of Islamic learning. See Āqā Buzurg Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharī'ah ila Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah* [The Index of Shi'i Writings] (Tehran: University of Tehran Press, 1964). The smaller work of Ṭihrānī is *Ṭabaqāt A'lām al-Shī'ah* [Classes of Shi'ah Scholars] (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1971).

15 On different types of minorities and minoritization as a process, see Martin Accad, "Minoritization," in *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, ed. J. Andres (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 87–98 (87).

by the scholarly mainstream. The Shi'ah have, over the centuries, come to embrace their nonconformity. They are taught by their religious leaders, the imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, to wear denigrating putdowns as labels of honour. One instructive example is the case of a mid-eighth century Shi'i named 'Utayba, *bayā' al-qasb*, seller of sugarcane, who complained to the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Šādiq (d. 765 CE), about those who hurled vilifying abuse at the Shi'a using the term *rāfiḍah* (lit. rejectors).¹⁶ The imam replied in irenic and celebratory tones, urging his followers to embrace the label, for God, he insisted, blesses those who follow the teachings of the imams of the Ahl al-Bayt.

Violence and Persecution

One of the most overarching self-perceptions and self-portrayals held by Shi'a Muslims for centuries is that Shi'i communities have been victims of *iḍṭihād* and *ẓulm* by political authorities and Sunni religious classes aligned with the establishment.¹⁷ The term *iḍṭihād* in Shi'i religious parlance stems from a feeling of being a targeted minority, while *ẓulm*, often employed in the idiomatic construct, *maẓlūmiyyat al-Shi'ah*, describes the Shi'i perception of the enduring oppression Shi'ahs faced in history and up to the present day.¹⁸

The patriarchal figure of Shi'i Islam, 'Alī, is said to have confessed to a group of disciples in Kufa that he was treated unjustly ever since the passing of the Prophet

16 While there are different senses and usages of the term *rāfiḍah* in medieval Islam, the general agreement among historians dates the origins of the appellation apparently to a group of Shi'ah, that is, partisans of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. The faction in question opposed Zayd b. 'Alī's rebellion in the year 740 and, moreover, took issue with his refusal of their demand to publicly disassociate himself from Abū Bakr and 'Umar and to deem them sinful usurpers. In later periods, the term *rāfiḍah* took on new but conceptually similar meanings that converged on the same theme of rejection, desertion, and departure from the mainstream. On a detailed study of the term, see Etan Kohlberg, "The Term Rāfiḍa in Imāmī Shi'i Usage," in *In Praise of the Few: Studies in Shi'i Thought and History*, ed. A. Ehteshami (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 160–165; W. Montgomery Watt, "The Rāfiḍites: A Preliminary Study," *Oriens* 16 (1963): 110–121.

17 Broadly, both terms relate to oppression. More specifically, *iḍṭihād* describes persecution, while *ẓulm* speaks of wrongdoings, whether violent or otherwise. In Islamic parlance, *ẓulm* is the opposite of justice. Muslim scriptures describe *ẓulm* as something disliked by God. The tenth-century *ḥadīth* collector narrates a report attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad which draws a nexus between *ẓulm* and darkness (*ẓulumāt*): 'Beware of *ẓulm*, for *ẓulm* will become darkness on the Day of Resurrection.' Al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-Kāfi*, 8 vols., ed. 'A. A. al-Ghaffārī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 2000), 2:332.

18 The construct *maẓlūmiyyat al-Shi'ah* is widely used in modern parlance among the Shi'i faithful today, whether in popular culture, mourning eulogies and requiem processions, or religious sermons and political speeches. For instance, under the section entitled *maẓlūmiyyat al-Shi'ah*, the Markaz al-Abḥāth al-'Aqā'idīyyah, the official research centre website of the leading Shi'i authority today, namely Ayatullah Sayyid 'Alī al-Sistānī of Najaf, a Shi'i layperson from Bahrain asks in the question-and-answer section, 'Why are the Shi'ah constantly oppressed?' The response typifies the self-perception of the community as *maẓlūm*, oppressed, going on to state, 'Indeed, the followers of the truth are always in a battle against the followers of falsehood ... the Shi'ah are the Folk of Truth for they have always been oppressed.' See <https://www.aqaed.net/faq/922/> (accessed 17 June 2025).

Muḥammad, an intimation foretold to him by Muḥammad himself, who is reported to have said to 'Alī, 'The *umma* will betray you and they shall break my covenant. Indeed, you are to me as Aaron was to Moses.'¹⁹ Similarly, in an elegiac poem attributed to the fifth imam, Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 733 CE), the imam brings attention to the hypocrisy of Muslims who violently oppress the Shi'ah for the love they show towards the Family of the Prophet Muḥammad. The verses are intended to express protest and disdain for the slaying of pious believers, which for Muḥammad al-Bāqir is a situation synonymous with the Shi'ah. The conflation of the terms *Shi'i* and *mu'min* (believer) in the Qur'ān is indeed an old motif in Shi'i qur'ānic exegesis.²⁰ The poem reads:

The Jews, out love for their prophet,
Were spared the disasters of changing times.
And Christians, out of love for Jesus,
Walk freely and safely in the villages of Najrān.
But the believers [the Shi'ah], out of love for the family of Muḥammad,
Are cast into fire across the lands.²¹

The history of medieval Islam records many episodes of *iḏṭihād* against Shi'i communities and leaders who harboured the revolutionary fervour of the 'Alids and those who saw themselves as the true heirs to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. The tenth-century historian and literati Abu l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967 CE), himself a Shi'i of Zaydī sympathies, authored a work surveying the slaying and oppression of the 'Alids, the descendants of 'Alī. The *Maqātil al-Ṭālibīn*, *The Slaying of the Talibis*, recounts the lives and slaying of around 150 descendants of 'Alī and Shi'is who were murdered, poisoned, imprisoned, and treated unjustly by Muslim rulers and authorities from the formative period of Islam until the year 925 CE, the year when the work was completed.²²

What was the motive behind the composition of the *Maqātil al-Ṭālibīn*? The author of the work, al-Iṣfahānī, leaves little room for conjecture and speculation when he states his motivation in the opening sermon of the book. The 'Alids are righteous and followed the path of truth, he writes, and when they stood up to oppressive rulers they were chased out of their lands, imprisoned, and eventually

19 Al-Ṭabrasī, *al-Iḥtijāj*, 2 vols. (Najaf: Maṭābi' al-Nu'mān, 1966), 1.280.

20 On the Shi'i method of exegesis, see Meir Bar Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shiism* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 87–124.

21 Cited in Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 110 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth, 1982), 36:357. The original Arabic is as follows: *إن اليهود لحبيهم لنبيهم، أمنوا بوايق حادث الأزمان، وذو الصليب بحب آل محمد، يرمون في الأفاق بالنيران بحب عيسى أصبحوا، يمشون صحوا في قرى نجران، والمؤمنون بحب آل محمد، يرمون في الأفاق بالنيران*

22 For an overview of the perceived violence inflicted on Shi'is in history, see the detailed historical study of the twentieth century Shi'i historian Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyyah, *al-Shi'ah wa l-Ḥākīmūn* [The Shi'ah and Political Rulers] (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Riḍā, 2012).

slain.²³ Whether in Medina, Iraq, the Hijaz, Yemen, or Iran, Shi'i leaders and learned sages were killed and oppressed. Memories of this kind are not confined to the medieval period. Modern Shi'i authorities followed in the same vein.²⁴

Modern Shi'i writers, scholars, and the learned elite make a point of insisting that slaying, violent death, and memories of oppression are the ubiquitously salient themes that permeate the historical and contemporary religious and political landscape of Shi'i Islam. Beyond the medieval memories that recount the tragedies of the Ahl al-Bayt and their followers, the moderns have spilled much ink too on the topic. Two recent examples should suffice to make the point.

Violence and Persecution as Result of Theological Exclusivity

The first example is *al-Shī'ah fī l-Islām* (*Shī'ah dar Islām* in Persian, *The Shi'ah in Islam* in English) penned by the renowned Iranian Shi'i philosopher and exegete Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭābātābā'i (d. 1982). The work was widely received in Europe and North America. It was translated into English by Hossein Nasr, a prominent name and influential scholar of Islamic studies in the West. Ṭābātābā'i sets out to achieve two, perhaps three, goals. The Shi'ah, he avers, are not a foreign, exogenous entity whose origins fall outside of Islam. Rather, and as the title of the book suggests, Shi'ism is part and parcel of Islam and finds its origins in the Qur'ān and the practice of the early community of believers. Moreover, Ṭābātābā'i adds, history has not been kind to Shi'i Muslim communities in the early centuries of Islam, especially during a stretch of historical epochs he describes as *the troubled periods* (*al-ayyām al-aṣībah*) where the Shi'ah faced marginalization and attacks from all fronts, political, religious, and otherwise.²⁵ Perhaps most significantly, the Shi'ah are distinct from other religious communities of Islam owing to their theological outlook and scriptural hermeneutic. Ṭābātābā'i explains that for Shi'i Muslims, the Qur'ān is the fountainhead of religious and philosophical knowledge, and it carries exoteric teachings and bears esoteric truths that need deciphering by qualified exegetes. While the outer, apparent message of the Muslim sacred scripture is not beyond the reach of Muslims, the inner, hidden meanings can be unlocked only by the Prophet and his household, the Ahl al-Bayt. The position elucidated by Ṭābātābā'i is quintessentially Shi'i, in the sense that the innermost secrets of religion are beyond the grasp of the multitudes. And it is certainly interesting, for it appears to embrace and celebrate the minority status of Shi'ism as well as to claim epistemic interpretive exclusivity to the inner facets of Islamic teachings. The theological exclusivity claimed by Ṭābātābā'i and the Shi'ah tradition in general appears in the earliest accounts of the historical memory of the community. In a widely recognized *ḥadīth* – attested in Sunni and Shi'i *ḥadīth* corpora – the

23 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, 1:24–25.

24 See for example, Mughniyyah, *al-Shī'ah*, 73–116.

25 Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭābātābā'i, *al-Shī'ah fī l-Islām* (Beirut: Baqiyat Allāh al-A'zam Centre, 1999), 44–57.

Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have said, ‘I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Alī is its gate;’ or, in another iteration, ‘I am the city of knowledge, and ‘Alī is its gate, whoever wishes to enter the city, let him enter through the gate.’²⁶ While for Shi‘ah Muslims the essence of the *ḥadīth* is to be understood as pointing to the epistemic priority of ‘Alī and his insights into the exoteric and esoteric truths of Islam, the more significant thrust of this report and other similar ones is as follows. The truth rests with the minority, not the majority. ‘Alī, the Shi‘ah would contend, is the only relevant minority to follow in matters of religion. Typically, to support such a theological claim, the Shi‘ah marshal two *ḥadīths* of similar content. In the first, the Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have said, ‘‘Alī is with the truth, and the truth is with ‘Alī. They shall not part ways until they return to me at the Hawḍ,’²⁷ a large cistern where Muḥammad will await his followers in paradise. The second is where ‘Alī is believed to have said, ‘O People! Do not feel lonely on the path of guidance because of the few who follow it.’²⁸

Violence and Persecution as Markers of Belief and Piety

The second example of modern Shi‘i writings on oppression is a more recent endeavour by the contemporary Iraqi jurist and theologian, Sayyid Riyāḍ al-Ḥakīm, entitled *The Shia: Identity, Persecution, Horizons*, appended with the extra subtitle, *Victims of Terrorism and Extremism*. The intervention of al-Ḥakīm is significant in several ways. The Ḥakīms are a highly influential clerical family across the Shi‘i world who have produced many learned theologians, jurists, and *mujtahids* (that is,

26 The *ḥadīth* is accepted as sound in Shi‘ism and was narrated by prominent companions and the Ahl al-Bayt, including ‘Alī himself, his sons al-Ḥasan (d. 670 CE) and al-Ḥusayn (d. 680 CE), his son ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 714 CE), and his son Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 732 CE). See al-Ṣadūq, *al-Āmālī* (Qum: Mu‘assasat al-Bi‘thah, 1996), 425. In Sunnism, the *ḥadīth* is accepted as sound by some early medieval *ḥadīth* scholars but rejected by later ones. On the contested nature of the *ḥadīth*, see Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 42:379 [following al-Baghdādī]. Among the Sunni *ḥadīth* collections, the report appears in al-Ḥakīm al-Naysābūrī (d. 1014), *al-Mustadrak ‘ala al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, 11 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Minhāj, 2018), 6:50. Al-Naysābūrī follows the *ḥadīth* grading criteria of the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, the two most authentic *ḥadīth* compilations in Sunnism, namely *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. He avers that the report of ‘Alī being the gate to the prophetic city of knowledge is *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) according to the Bukhārī and Muslim. However, the later *ḥadīth* critic, al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), who composed a critical abridgment of al-Naysābūrī’s work, rendered the same report as spurious. Al-Dhahabī explains his reasons for rejecting the *ḥadīth* in praise of ‘Alī as follows: ‘[Contrary to al-Naysābūrī] I say [the *ḥadīth*] is fabricated. Then he [al-Naysābūrī] said: “Abū al-Ṣalt is reliable [narrator of *ḥadīth*]. I, however, say: By God no! He [Abū al-Ṣalt] is a Rāfiḍī, not a reliable [narrator], even if Ibn Mu‘īn deemed him reliable.’ Abū al-Ṣalt was the lowest common link, that is, the person from whom many hear the report. And although Yaḥyā b. Mu‘īn viewed Abū al-Ṣalt as reliable, al-Dhahabī holds a contrary view. See Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Mawḍū‘āt al-Mustadrak*, 4, online version, <https://shamela.ws/book/30341> (accessed 5 July 2025).

27 See Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*, 3 vols. (Najaf: publisher, 1956), 2:260.

28 Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-Anwār*, 67:107.

jurists).²⁹ Al-Ḥakīm describes the rancorous oppression Shi‘ah Muslims have faced in the course of Islamic history as *genocide*, perpetrated by different actors across space and time, starting with the Umayyads and Abbasids in the first centuries of Islam, and all the way down to the early modern period with the Ottomans and later Salafi-Jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda.³⁰

Indeed, the idea of unrelenting oppression and inflicted violence appears ubiquitously in popular self-perceptions and cultural expressions of Shi‘i religiosity. They serve the purpose of showing that Shi‘i Islam has endured centuries upon centuries of unending violence and persecution of the political and religious kind. Perhaps the tragedy of Karbala is the most significant historical event in Shi‘i memory that has acquired theological and social connotations over the centuries, up to the present. In the Shi‘i imagination, past and present, Karbala is the paradigmatic showdown between good and evil and between justice and oppression.³¹

The tragedy of Karbala took place in the year 680 CE. The historical sources inform us that al-Ḥusayn, son of ‘Alī and grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, was killed tragically in battle, in Karbala, Iraq. Al-Ḥusayn led a small army of loyal companions and a small retinue of his close family members, including his children. When the Umayyad leader Yazīd b. Mu‘āwiyah (reigned 680–683 CE) rose to power in Damascus, after the nomination of his father, prominent members of the Ahl al-Bayt refused to pledge allegiance to the new caliph, whom they considered impious and undeserving of the leadership of the Muslims.³² The Umayyad soldiery overwhelmed the camp of al-Ḥusayn, killing him, his children, and his companions, before taking his womenfolk captive to be paraded in the streets

29 See Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi‘ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

30 Riyadh al-Hakeem, *The Shia: Identity, Persecution, Horizons; Victims of Terrorism and Extremism*, trans. E. Hammoud (Dearborn, MI: Mainstay Foundation, 2015), 139–154.

31 On the sociological dimension of the tragedy of Karbala and related Shi‘i rituals of mourning and grief, see the excellent study by the Iraqi sociologist of religion, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥaydarī, *Trāḥīdīyā Karbalā’* [The Tragedy of Karbala] (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 1999). See also the recently published study on the links between the historical event of Karbala and later Shi‘i identity, myth, and suffering, by Torsten Hylen, *The Karbala Story and Early Shi‘ite Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025). On the devotional rituals associated with the commemorations of Karbala, see Lucy Deacon, *Karbala in the Ta‘ziyeh Episode* (Leiden: Brill, 2025).

32 The memory of Yazīd in Sunni and Shi‘i historical accounts is not terribly dissimilar. Both historical traditions view Yazīd as a contemptible, villainous figure of early Islam. For instance, al-Dhahabī, the medieval Sunni authority who often took adversarial theological stances against the Shi‘ah, recounts historical reports that describe Yazīd as a reprobate, consumer of alcohol, who falsely claims to perform the devotional prayers. See al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, 23 vols., ed. M. A. al-‘Irqūsī (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risālah, 1996), 3:324. Even more, the famed Sunni polymath, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201) penned a short work deeming the cursing of Yazīd an act of legal permissibility, given the heinous acts perpetrated against al-Ḥusayn and his family. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Radd ‘alā al-Muta‘ashib al-‘Anīd al-Mānī min dhamm Yazīd*, ed. H. ‘A. Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2005).

of Damascus.³³ The historical Muslim accounts portray the events of Karbala as a sombre occasion marking the tragic murder of a pious Muslim leader and the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad. Few accounts are sparing in detail. The Syrian Sunni historian Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanablī (d. 1679) echoes the wording of his medieval predecessors, writing,

It is said the corpse of al-Ḥusayn was found with thirty-three stab wounds and thirty-four sword strikes. Among the descendants of Fāṭima [daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad] seventeen men were killed alongside him.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: sixteen men of the Ahl al-Bayt were killed alongside al-Ḥusayn. The likes of which have never set foot on earth since. Some evil-doers carried his [al-Ḥusayn] decapitated head before Ibn Ziyād.³⁴

Writing earlier, Ibn Kathīr, the renowned Sunni historian and exegete, attends to the tragic dimension of the killing of al-Ḥusayn when he states,

The killing of al-Ḥusayn should bring sadness to every Muslim. For he [al-Ḥusayn] was among the leaders of the Muslims, scholar among the companions, and the son of the daughter of the Messenger of God, who is the best of his daughters. He [al-Ḥusayn] was a righteous servant, brave, and generous. What the Shiʿah do, however, is not appropriate, that is, to express serve grief and sadness, most of which is probably performed ostentatiously.³⁵

Ibn Kathīr's reference to the Shiʿah alludes to the stark difference in the ways in which the community, now and before, commemorates the death of al-Husayn. Almost immediately after the Battle of Karbala, the death of al-Husayn became a religious symbol of suffering and martyrdom among his followers and loyalists in the nascent Shiʿi communities. Moreover, a culture of guilt and desire for atonement emerged, possibly as the earliest reaction to the killing of al-Ḥusayn, among a movement of Kufans known as the *Tawwābūn* (the Penitents).³⁶ In later periods,

33 For a detailed account of the events in Karbala, including the killing of al-Ḥusayn, the captivity of his family, and fierce exchanges between al-Ḥusayn and his companions, on the one side, and the soldiery of Yazīd on the other, see the account of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), whose narrative is utilized by both Sunni and Shiʿi retellings of the story of Karbala. Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. xix: The Caliphate of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiyah*, trans. I.K.A. Howard (New York: University of New York Press, 1990), 91–179. For a study of the early historical accounts of Karbala, see Part I in Torsten Hylen, *The Karbala Story and Early Shiʿite Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

34 Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab*, 11 vols., ed. M. al-Arnāʾūt (Beirut and Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1986), 1:274. Ibn Ziyād was the governor of Kufa and Basra during the caliphate of Yazīd.

35 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wa l-Nihāyah*, 21 vols., ed. ʿA. Turkī (Riyadh: Dār Hīj, 1996–1999), 11:597.

36 Gerald Hawting compares the atonement of the *Tawwābūn* with the Jewish Yom Kippur, suggesting parallels between the Shiʿi conception of ʿĀshūrā (the Tenth Day of the Muslim month of Muḥarram when al-Ḥusayn was killed) and the Day of Atonement. See “The Tawwābūn, Atonement, and ʿĀshūrā,” in *The Development of Islamic Ritual*, ed. G. Hawting (London: Routledge, 2017), 173–181. For a detailed study of the speeches, views, and historical records of the *Tawwābūn*,

the scholarly community of the Shi'ah circulated scores of reports attributed to the Prophet and the later imams of the Ahl al-Bayt describing the great merit of visiting the grave of al-Ḥusayn and the many spiritual privileges the visitors to the grave will receive on the Day of Judgement. The tenth-century Shi'i traditionist Ibn Qūlawayh al-Qummī (d. 978 CE) composed a large tome of hundreds of *ḥadīths* that describe the visitation to al-Ḥusayn as a test of religious commitment of the pious who will receive the pleasure of God and His Messenger; moreover, visiting al-Ḥusayn, we read, will bring atonement for sins, among other spiritual benefits.³⁷

As mentioned earlier, the symbol of al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom took on cosmic proportions among Shi'i Muslims, touching upon the problem of suffering and lamentation as well as grief and devotional rituals that stem from pietistic passion. The problem for Shi'i Muslims was not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, and how to make the physical pain, personal loss, or worldly defeat sufferable. Shi'i theology came up with a way to find solace in suffering and to render lamentation a form of worship to earn divine favour. A plethora of traditions in medieval Shi'i works describe expressions of suffering, such as weeping for the death of al-Ḥusayn, as acts of devotional piety which cleanse the hearts of believers of hypocrisy to make way for compassion. While the historical motives behind these reports may have to do with attempts by later Shi'i imams to fend off political rivals from other factions of the Ahl al-Bayt who were also claiming to be the rightful inheritors of the Prophet's mantle, the religious import of these narrations became integral to the Twelver branch of Shi'ism. The eighth imam, 'Alī al-Riḍā (d. 818 CE), told his close companion, al-Rayyān b. Shabīb, that the angels in the heavens wept for al-Ḥusayn and tears shed for al-Ḥusayn bring atonement to the believers:

O, son of Shabīb. I heard from my father [the seventh imam, Mūsa al-Kāẓim], who heard from his father [the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sādiq], who heard from his grandfather [the fifth imam, Muḥammad al-Bāqir], who said: 'when my grandfather al-Husayn was killed, the skies wept blood, and the soil become red.'

O, son of Shabīb. If you weep for al-Ḥusayn until tears touch your cheeks, God shall atone every sin of yours, big or small, and many or little.³⁸

The military defeat in Karbala did not, it seems, demoralize the Shi'ah; rather, loss and defeat became a catalyst for theological creativity and eschatological hope. Over the course of many centuries, the memory of al-Ḥusayn refused to fade away as Shi'i Muslims developed five major rituals that kept the Battle of Karbala an emulated reality intimately embedded in the religious psyche of the

see Torsten Hylan, *The Karbala Story and Early Shi'ite Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 119–170.

37 See for example, Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-Ziyārāt* (Qum: Nashr al-Faqāhah, 1996), 236, 261, 286.

38 Al-Ṣadūq, *al-Āmālī* (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Bi'thah, 1996), 92.

community of the faithful. These rituals included communal commemorations (*majalis al-ta'ziyah*), visitations to the tomb of al-Ḥusayn in Karbala, particularly on 'Āshūrā', the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muḥarram when al-Ḥusayn was killed, and the Arbaeen, that is, 40 days after 'Āshūrā'. Most saliently, the rituals also include public mourning processions, or requiems (*al-mawākib al-ḥusayniyyah*, or *al-'azā'iyyah*), public dramatizations of the Battle of Karbala in the form of passion plays (Arabic and Persian: *tashābih*), and, notoriously, acts of self-flagellation (*taṭbīr*, or *qama zani* as it is known in Persian).³⁹

One of the themes to which mourning sessions attend is the idea of abandonment and being a minority. Quite often in mourning sessions, crowds of believers proclaim in unison the Arabic lamentations *wa qillatā* and *wa maḥlūmā*, where, according to Shi'i cultural memory, the first laments the feeling of isolation and abandonment while the latter speaks to the oppression faced by the religious leaders of Shi'ism, which amount to a culture and theology of redemptive suffering that is both localized and one that transcends geography, language, and ethnicity.⁴⁰

Part and parcel of Shi'ism today is the idea that suffering and being a minority ought to be regarded as a virtue, an act of spiritual devotion to endure divine trials inflicted on pious believers, who, according to numerous Shi'i scriptures and theological tracts, are few in number and ostracized by the many, presumably the Muslim multitudes.⁴¹ The Shi'i traditions of mourning insist that suffering is inextricably linked to love. The path of truth is replete with a great many testing moments and tumultuous encounters. In the Shi'i and Sunni traditions, students of Islam will know all too well the numerous *ḥadīths* that delineate markers of belief and piety.

Suffering for the sake of love is a forgotten theological principle integral to Shi'ism. When a man expressed his love for the Ahl al-Bayt before the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765 CE), the latter is believed to have responded, 'Prepare for tribulations. By God, tribulations inflict us and our lovers (or followers) quicker than the flow of water down a stream valley.'⁴² Similarly, the ninth-century Shi'i historian Ibrāhīm al-Thaqāfi (d. 896 CE) reports that 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib instructs the lovers of the Ahl al-Bayt to anticipate testing trials – divine and mundane – when he said, 'let the one who loves us, the Ahl al-Bayt, prepare for tribulations.'⁴³

39 For a historical and sociological study of mourning sessions across different Shi'i cultures and geographies, see the collection of essays in Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Eternal Performance: Taziyeh and Other Shiite Rituals* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).

40 On the history and theology of suffering, redemption, and self-perception of communal oppression and violence, see the now classic work by Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi'ism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011). For more recent studies and comparison with Christianity, see the forthcoming study of Mohammad Mahdi Moravveji, *Redemptive Suffering in Catholicism and Ithnā 'Asharī Shi'ism*.

41 On the merits of being a Shi'i and a Muslim minority, see the chapter entitled, "The Merits of the Shi'ah," in Muḥammad al-Rayshahrī, *Mizān al-Ḥikmah* [The Balance of Wisdom], 4 vols. (Qum: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995), 2:1538.

42 Abū Ja'far al-Ṭūsī, *al-Āmālī* (Qum: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1995), 154.

43 See Ibrāhīm al-Thaqāfi al-Kūfī, *al-Ghārāt*, 2 vols., ed. J. A. al-Muḥaddith (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār-i Millī, 1975), 2:588.

The Arabic for tribulation is *balā'*. The concept is taken up prominently in Shi'i theology and especially in the way Shi'i Islam navigates and negotiates the reality of being a minority within Islam and beyond. Rather than feel despondent and abandoned, the Shi'i tradition encourages believers to show gratitude during tribulations and to accept testing trials as moments of divine grace where God sets the pious on the path of moral rectitude. According to numerous traditions, when the Ahl al-Bayt address their followers, the Shi'ah, they caution,

You shall not become believers until you consider tribulation divine favour and until you regard comfort as calamity. Indeed, to bear patient during tribulation carries greater virtue than heedlessness during comfort.⁴⁴

Many similar traditions were collected by the tenth-century authority Muḥammad b. Humām al-Iskāfī, whose family kept close relations with the Ahl al-Bayt, and whose collection formed one of the earliest books dedicated to the topic of tribulations. The reader is told that the lovers of the Ahl al-Bayt are tested in various ways and every so often. The sixth imam, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, is reported to have told his companion Yūnus b. Ya'qūb the following:

'Cursed is the body that is not tested by tribulation every forty days.' When Yūnus became dismayed, he asked al-Ṣādiq if he heard right. The imam continued:

'Cursed indeed! O, Yūnus, know that tribulations entail physical hurt, aggressive attacks, accidental falls, calamity, lapsing into mistakes, breaking of the strap of sandals, eye twitching, and anything of the kind. God honours the believer by cleansing him of sins every forty days, even by little afflictions like sudden sorrow which appears out of nowhere.'⁴⁵

Whether momentary or prolonged, painful or harmless, bodily or concerning the mind, the theology of suffering in Shi'ism invites its adherents to embrace tribulations of all stripes by seeing suffering as acts of divine favour, especially the tribulations inflicted on them as a minority group within Islam. Muslim theological models of theodicy, or theories of evil, come in different hues. For Avicenna, for example, the celebrated Muslim philosopher of medieval times, evil is necessary and helps believers understand the good.⁴⁶ However, a theodicy that invites the

44 See l-Iskāfī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīṣ* (Qum: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, n.d.), 5. Some Shi'i scholars cast aspersions on the authorship of the *Kitāb al-Tamhīṣ*, attributing the work to Ibn Shu'bah al-Ḥarrānī, al-Iskāfī's student. See Muḥsin al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, 10 vols., ed. Ḥ. al-Amīn (Beirut: Dār al-Ta'āruḥ, 1987–2006), 5:186.

45 Al-Iskāfī, *Kitāb al-Tamhīṣ* (Qum: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, n.d.), 31.

46 See Shams Inatī, *The Problem of Evil: Ibn Sina's Theodicy* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017). For other Muslim accounts of theodicy, see Eric Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For a Shi'i account of theodicy, see Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, *Divine Justice*, trans. S. 'Abidī, et al (Qum: Research Department of the International Center for Islamic Studies, 2004).

believer to find solace in suffering, pain, and oppression is one of the defining characteristics of Shi'ism, not too dissimilar to the concept of *duḥkha* in Buddhism and Jainism, for instance. To be cast aside, oppressed, or maligned by the majority is hardly conducive to prosperity and good living. However, for Shi'i Muslims, the ordeals they are forced to confront as a minority are rooted in a theology that encourages the faithful to embrace the tumultuous and challenging as acts of providence, spiritual trials, and episodic graces of mercy.

Polemics

Polemics are starkly different from debate and dialogue. Polemics are monological and aphoristic. They aim towards disparagement and refutations and look to dismiss the worldview and arguments of interlocutors as invalid, thereby rendering opponents beyond the pale. Polemics are often charged and animated by hostility, which can stem from theological sectarianism, political conflict, or social disharmony. Dialogues, however, are conducted in good faith – most of the time – and involve a to-and-fro and back-and-forth movement.⁴⁷ Dialogue is the opposite of unflinching sectarianism. As Michel Montaigne once put it, 'human understanding is marvellously enlightened by daily conversation with men, for we are, otherwise, compressed and heaped up in ourselves, and have our sight limited to the length of our own noses.'⁴⁸

In the realm of religious discourses and especially intra-religious debate, the purpose of many polemics is to tarnish the image of opponents and to render their claims to truth repugnant and unappealing. It is hardly hyperbolic to say polemics are part and parcel of intra-Muslim theological debates and disputations – now and in the centuries before. Such a reality is not confined to sectarian groups, whether Shi'i, Sunni, Ibādī, or otherwise. Put differently, as well as Shi'i–Sunni polemics, for example, there are intra-Sunni and intra-Shi'i polemics which centre around topics many Muslim traditions consider contentious, such as the role of philosophy in religious discourse, the visiting of graves and shrines, intercession of the dead, and on the question of whether God is corporeal, immaterial, or ineffable.

Islamic history bears witness to many sectarian polemics and disparagements against the Shi'as and many similar sectarian attacks against Sunnis. As a matter of fact, Shi'i polemics against Sunnism are no less virulent, animated, and dehumanizing than the Sunni polemics against Shi'ism. For the purposes of the present contribution, however, I will focus on Muslim polemics that target Shi'ism. These polemics seem to serve two purposes: first, they conform to social and political agendas intended to portray Shi'ism as beyond the confines of the Muslim *ummah*, and second, they serve to render the Shi'ah a pernicious minority to be treated with

47 M. De Caro and D. Macarthur, eds., *Hilary Putnam: Philosophy as Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 1.

48 Michel Montaigne, *The Essays* (1603), trans. J. Florio, ed. Adolphe Cohn (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), 135.

suspicion, owing to the centuries-old perception of Shi'ism as theological heresy and political threat. History records many episodes of volatile community conflict and internecine violence between Shi'a Muslims and Sunni Muslims, which were sometimes precipitated by popular polemics. The medieval Muslim historian and biographer Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233) recounts a few of these tumultuous events in Baghdad. In one account, in the year 1051 CE riots broke out between the Shi'a and Sunni residents of Baghdad which led to many deaths on both sides, and which resulted in the burning of the Shi'i mausoleum housing the seventh and eighth imams, Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 799 CE) and Muhammad al-Jawād (d. 835 CE). The historical accounts report that the riots erupted after Sunni residents accused their Shi'i counterparts of holding onto theological beliefs that exaggerated the rank of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661 CE).⁴⁹

Whether today or in the past, a fair share of intra-Muslim polemics is motivated by sectarianism. And while the term sectarianism is hardly disputed both semantically and conceptually,⁵⁰ I employ it to mean something quite specific. Sectarianism can indeed be multifaceted and variegated. For the present purposes, however, I conceptualize sectarianism as a conscious theological project to criticize and exclude the other. Sectarian polemics tend to place great emphasis on definitions in order to determine who is Muslim, and who is not Muslim. Definitions are therefore oppressive, for the shaping of conceptual and semantic boundaries cannot take place without the exclusion and marginalization of other conceptual cognates. When definitions are presented or fronted as normative and authentically sound, other epistemic possibilities are discounted as invalid, irrelevant, or inconsequential.

Shi'i Muslims contend that when medieval – and modern – Muslim religious authorities delineate the boundaries of belief and practice as defined by the Sunni majority, the definition turns into a process of implicit criticism and explicit exclusion. A recent study terms this phenomenon *Sunni chauvinism*, where groups such as the Shi'ah are set aside as a minority because they do not meet the requisite conditions of the Sunni normative bias.⁵¹ In contemporary sectarianism and polemics – especially the animated kind – a particular strand of Sunnism, namely Salafism,

49 Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī l-Tārīkh*, 10 vols., ed. 'U. 'A. Tadmurī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1997), 8:95. Historical accounts seem to indicate that the political elite and rulers aligned themselves with the Sunni camp during periods of the sectarian conflict. The medieval historian Abū l-Fiḍā' (d. 1331) recounts one particularly violent episode in the year 1257, when Shi'i neighbourhoods in Baghdad were looted, and Shi'i women were attacked and raped by caliphal soldiery. These actions, reportedly carried out on the orders of Abū Bakr, son of Caliph al-Musta'ṣim bi-illāh (d. 1258), followed intense sectarian clashes between Shi'ahs and Sunnis. See Abū l-Fiḍā', *al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, 4 vols. (Cairo: al-Maṭba'ah al-Ḥusayniyyah al-Miṣriyyah, 1907), 3:193.

50 The term sectarianism is not easy to define. Recent studies caution against the application of the term without serious qualification. Fanar Haddad recently argued that the term is not only difficult to use, but any attempt to do so is futile – and dangerous. See Fanar Haddad, *Understanding Sectarianism* (London: Hurst, 2020).

51 See Teena Purohit, *Sunni Chauvinism and the Roots of Muslim Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

has placed Shi'ism in its polemical crosshairs. Salafi polemics which take aim at Shi'ism find their way – sometimes – into Sunni quarters. The spillover is palpable. Too often Salafi polemics gain traction to find their way into the mainstream.⁵²

Whence do anti-Shi'i sectarian polemics spring, especially the kind prevalent in the present? Identifying singular causes, or epochs in history, or specific theological purveyors behind these polemics is an arduous task – and certainly beyond the scope of the present contribution. One can say with some confidence, however, that a great deal of the contemporary sectarian polemics against the Shi'ah today – and by far the most popular and widely circulated – are those that find their roots, directly and indirectly, in the writings of the medieval figure of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328).⁵³

Today, Ibn Taymiyyah is regarded as one of the normative voices of austere Sunnism, someone who left an indelible mark on the Muslim intellectual landscape. As the editors of one study put it, Ibn Taymiyyah is 'revered by what is called the Wahhabi movement and championed by Salafi groups who demand a return to the pristine golden age of the Prophet. His writings have been a source of inspiration for radical groups to justify acts of violence and armed struggle.'⁵⁴ Others in the Sunni camp, however, view him as a controversial theological rabble-rouser and vociferous critic, whose nonconformist views and uncouth statements led him to be tried by Muslim judges and imprisoned several times, until he eventually passed away in prison.⁵⁵

Ibn Taymiyyah demonized the beliefs and practices of Shi'i Islam, bringing against the Shi'ah a charge sheet of alleged theological heresies, wayward acts of devotion, and social and political betrayals against the Muslim majority. It is these very polemics and vilifications which were levelled by Ibn Taymiyyah centuries ago that became integral to the polemical arsenal of a great many modern-day sectarian diatribes and online attacks against the Shi'ah. Polemicists find a way to belittle and cast aspersions on the Shi'i by recalling the warnings of Ibn Taymiyyah

52 A case in point is the late Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (d. 2022), a highly respected Sunni scholar and global figure. Many Sunnis saw in al-Qaradāwī a champion of *al-waṣāṭiyyah*, that is, *moderation* or *middle-of-the-road* Islam. For Shi'is, however, the late al-Azhar graduate and global mufti was a vocal purveyor of anti-Shi'ism who mainstreamed virulent sectarian polemics such as the popular claim that Shi'i Muslims commit polytheism when they visit the tombs of the Ahl al-Bayt and that Shi'is keep a different Qur'an from the majority Sunni. See Sagi Polka, *Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī: Spiritual Mentor of Waṣaṭī Salafism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019). On al-Qaradāwī's view of Shi'i Islam, see his 2008 release to the International Union of Muslims Scholars, of which he was the founding chair until his death, on his website <https://www.al-qaradawi.net/node/4975> (accessed 25 June 2025).

53 For Ibn Taymiyyah's view of and polemic against the Shi'ah, see Ṣā'ib 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, *Ibn Taymiyya: Ḥayātuhu, 'Aqā'iduhu, Mawqifahu min al-Shi'ah* (Qum: Markaz al-Ghadīr li l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyyah, 1997), 189–276.

54 See the introductory comments in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyyah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On the trials he faced, see Sherman Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39 (1994): 41–85.

55 For an overview of his career, life, and thought, see Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019).

who said, in relation to what he considered the treachery of Shi'ah Muslims in preferring to side with Christians against Muslims,

This is [something] that has been witnessed, namely their [the Shi'ah] support of the disbelievers against the Muslims, and their decision to let disbelief and disbelievers reign over Islam and Muslims. Do you not see that the Sunnis, though they say what they say about the Khawārij, the Rāfiḍah, and others among the people of innovation, yet still they [the Sunnis] do not assist the disbelievers in their religion, nor do they prefer the dominance of disbelief and its people over the emergence of a lesser innovation than that.⁵⁶

And, in reference to the Shi'i theological stance on the early Muslim community,

And when this is the case, it becomes clear that accusing them, or most of them, or some of them, of hypocrisy, as is claimed by some of Rāfiḍah [Shi'ah], is among the greatest slanders. This slander is a defining trait of the Rāfiḍah and their brethren among the Jews. Indeed, hypocrisy is widespread and manifest among the Rāfiḍah, the brothers of the Jews, and among all the factions there are none in whom hypocrisy is more numerous and more apparent than among them. Within them are the Nuṣayris, the Ismā'ilīs, and others like them – those who are among the most hypocritical, heretical, and hostile groups toward God and His Messenger.⁵⁷

The scathing and denigrating tone aside, what is evident from these statements of Ibn Taymiyyah – and there are plenty of similar examples in his writings – is that the Shi'ah are a pernicious minority in Islam who present persistent threats to the majority, because the Shi'ah plot surreptitiously to undermine the Sunni majority of Islam. The resurfacing of such centuries-old accusations of subterfuge against a Muslim minority like the Shi'ah, especially during the periods of internecine wars and global conflicts witnessed today, is yet another example of the minoritization from without – that is external rather than internal – intended to keep (Sunni) Islam pristine from the perceived heresies of Shi'i Islam.

Scornful theological condemnations and demonizations by religious authorities against minorities add significantly to the process of minoritization as a form of exclusion and suppression. More often than not, polemics forgo scholarly nuance and focus instead on defamatory speech and incendiary insults/denigrations.

Rancorous attacks against the Shi'ah by popular polemicists such as Ibn Taymiyyah represent a strand of Muslim learning and knowledge production that informs and inspires, directly and indirectly, social marginalization and religious excommunication, all of which lead to minoritization in the long run. Scornful polemics are neither isolated nor discrete in the chequered history of intra-Muslim

56 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*, 9 vols., ed. M. R. Sālim (Riyadh: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd al-Islāmiyyah, 1986), 6:375.

57 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Minhāj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah*, 9 vols., ed. M. R. Sālim (Riyadh: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd al-Islāmiyyah, 1986), 7:476.

disputations. Nor are such polemics confined to one group. Even minority schools like the Shi'ah came to employ similar if not identical scornful polemic against the Sunnis. And when in the handful of times in medieval and modern history the Shi'ah rose to power and dominated vast swathes of territory, the situation reversed. The Sunnis became the oppressed and persecuted minority, with the Shi'ah acting as the agents of political violence and social marginalization. Just as the Sunnis had done when in power – which was more often than not – the Shi'ah political and scholarly elite led a similar campaign of polemics and theological condemnations, forcing the process of minoritization from the outside and resorting to various means to ostracize Sunni luminaries and Sunni ideas of religion.

Conclusion

The history of Shi'i Islam is one in which theological conviction, political marginalization, and cultural memory converge to produce a deeply ingrained consciousness of minority identity. From the formative centuries to the present, Shi'i narratives of oppression and persecution have not merely recorded episodes of suffering but have transformed them into resources for theological reflection, spiritual resilience, and communal solidarity. The remembrance of Karbala, the embrace of tribulation as divine favour, and the cultivation of distinctive exegetical and doctrinal traditions have allowed Shi'ism to reinterpret its minority status as a sign of fidelity to truth rather than a mark of weakness. In this sense, the experience of marginalization has generated a rich theological grammar in which suffering is redemptive, love is tested through trial, and minority identity becomes a locus of moral and spiritual virtue.

At the same time, the persistence of anti-Shi'i polemics, whether in the medieval invectives of Ibn Taymiyyah or in contemporary sectarian discourse, demonstrates how theological contestation can reinforce processes of exclusion and minoritization. Polemics, by their very nature, collapse nuance into caricature and transform disagreement into disqualification. Yet the Shi'i tradition's long negotiation with such hostility underscores its adaptability and capacity to endure. The memory of injustice and the hope of eschatological vindication, Shi'ism offers a striking example of how a religious community can survive, and even flourish, between the twin pressures of oppression and polemics.

Part III

Concluding Reflections



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14 Blessing or Curse

The Identity of Christian Minority Communities from a Social Scientific Perspective

Joke van Saane

Abstract

Christianity, as a religious minority, can be theologically grounded in biblical texts. However, minority identity leads to psychological consequences on an individual social cognitive level, for society, and for mental health and behaviour. By declaring minority the religious norm, there should be awareness of related mechanisms that can potentially have a less positive effect on the believer themselves, on the church, and on society as a whole.

Keywords: social identity, minority, self-schema, ingroup bias, minority influence

Christianity as Minority: How to Cope

This volume elaborates the identity of Christian and other religious communities as a minority. The biblical roots of this concept are discussed mostly from a theological point of view, and some very diverse case studies are presented, both historical as well as contemporary. The authors conclude that being a minority seems to form an inevitable part of Christianity, and they describe several historical and contemporary ways of coping with that situation, which prove to be more or less successful.

Chapters 2–6 focus on the first letter of Peter in the New Testament. This was chosen because in that very influential letter (as is demonstrated in the various contributions), the core identity of Christians is formulated as being part of a minority. Originating in a dominantly Jewish world, Christian communities form an exception. They retain this minority position in society for a very long time, not only within but also outside New Testament Israel. In the Roman Empire as well, Christians form a minority, with a relatively low social status. Only in later centuries does this position change into an influential and dominant one. In modern secular Western societies, the next wave of movement has already begun; Christianity has increasingly been marginalized, along with a multitude of other religions and philosophies.

The early Christian community is considered ‘different,’ and the Apostle Peter shows in his letter that, in his eyes, being different is more of a strong characteristic

than a weakness, an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Being a Christian means being chosen to suffer, and it is an excellent opportunity to become or remain steadfast in faith. Presenting it this way, the reality of Christian suffering is inextricably linked to the call to faith and to honourable behaviour, based upon the assumption that this combination will exert an attraction on the society around the Christian Church. By acting like this, the missionary task of the church is fulfilled, which is also an important task for the church, in addition to steadfast faith and impeccable behaviour.

From a threat or risk, belonging to a minority is transformed into a unique, strong characteristic that not only *de facto* describes how the Christian community relates to its environment but even acquires a strong normative character. The church should distinguish itself from the world; Christians must be different. The desired Christian way of life is a life of choices against the majority, a life of criteria other than money and one's own interests. Even if the Christian Church no longer forms a minority, Christian life according to the standards of this letter of Peter means a life without power. The history of the church in Europe and America, among other places, makes it clear that this desired distance from power and dominance has often not been maintained, with many negative but also positive consequences that Peter obviously does not seem to have foreseen.

From this perspective, the contrast between Sunni Islam and Christianity seems significant. Quadir shows in his contribution that historically, Islam and Islamic laws and regulations are based on Islam as the majority religion. Since the inception of Islam, religion and society have always been connected. Laws for religion flow into laws for society; the starting point for the laws and regulations is an Islamic societal environment. This is different from Christianity, which was positioned as a minority religion from the start, and where the leaders of the first communities had to fight against the dominant beliefs and forms of behaviour in society. This difference between Islam and Christianity also means that the various options for Muslims in Western Christian or secular societies, such as isolation, integration, or assimilation, are not self-evident options for Muslims. These options were raised in social science based upon the Christian perspective, fitting better with the original status of Christian communities than with Islamic communities. These integration options therefore require new research and new religious guidelines. It is an interesting fact that the ongoing discussions about integration and Muslim communities also have a theological side, which, in the public and political debate, is little understood.

In this context of balancing between minority and majority, conversion is also an interesting phenomenon. Conversion from a minority religion to the dominant majority religion has obvious advantages if the majority religion also has influence on society as a whole. In that case, after conversion to a majority, one belongs to the group that can actually exercise influence and power. In many cases, such a conversion also opens the way to professional success. In the Netherlands, Muslims experience discrimination in the labour market over what they themselves associate with Islamic practices, such as women wearing a headscarf, or celebrating religious

festivals and rituals.¹ A conversion, or deconversion, can reduce the perceived disadvantages of one's own religion. And this is not only an issue for Muslims: it is only a few decades ago that in a country like the United States, higher government positions were preferably taken by Protestants, who were then considered as the majority. The majority religion is often accompanied by a strong social network that extends beyond one's own group. The (extrinsic) motivation of converts to a majority religion is usually high because, after all, the benefits of such a conversion are clear. The new social identity of the convert to a majority religion will usually be strong and unambiguous because conversion to a majority is not just about the affective or cognitive side of religion. In addition to experience and beliefs, the convert will also show behavioural changes, form new social networks, and adopt the lifestyle of the majority religion as much as possible.

At first glance, conversion to a minority religion seems to bring fewer advantages than conversion to a majority religion. Instead of belonging to the group that can exert influence, one now has to conform to the power structures outside one's own group. In this case, the convert is more likely to run the risk of becoming socially isolated. The strong social network of the majority religion is exchanged for a network that is mainly determined by religious identity. The other components of social identity, such as family, friends, and work, continue to exist, but can become detached from religious identity. Mofreh Abdelmasih and Jacobus (Kobus) Kok outline in their contribution that this can then take various forms (intersection, dominance, compartmentalization, and merger) that differ from each other in the degree of complexity. The religious identity of the convert to a minority is not necessarily less strong than that of the majority converts. On the contrary, in order to cope with the tension and stress that come with belonging to a minority religion, the convert needs strong religious convictions and a supportive religious social network.²

Religion as a Minority: The Social Scientific Perspective

The division into minority versus majority is partly an objective description of different groups within society. In many societies there is one majority religion and one or more minority religion(s). In the introductory contribution, Bernhard J.G. Reitsma calls this dimension of minority 'numerical minority.' A religious group that consists of less than 50% of the total community is by definition a minority religion. Belonging to a religious minority does not exclude belonging to a majority in terms of other characteristics, such as political preference, ethnicity, or social class. Minorities and majorities exist side by side, overlap, and differ from each other.

1 See "Eindrapport Onderzoek Moslimdiscriminatie" (Regioplan icm Universiteit Utrecht), 31 January 2025, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/fdd725d2-7630-4b79-9bab-606d6c1c147f/file>.

2 See Adis Duderija, "Literature Review: Identity Construction in the Context of Being a Minority Immigrant Religion: The Case of Western-Born Muslims," *Immigrants and Minorities* 25.2 (2007): 141–162.

The various social groups can exist more or less equally side by side, although the religious minority can of course also be negatively valued, both by outsiders and by members of the minority itself, the process of 'minoritization.' The more strongly power processes and dynamics are related to the minority-majority relationship, the more there is to lose, and the stronger the process of minoritization, or the fight against it, will be. So, being part of a minority is hardly an individual conscious choice; it is merely an inevitable consequence of living in a society.

Minority and Self-Perception: the Individual Level

So we can assume that the division into minority and majority is therefore an unavoidable social phenomenon, which in itself does not have to have any negative nor positive consequences. It is a way to organize society and to describe mutual relationships between groups. However, and in addition, the division of people into a minority or a majority also has a dimension that has to do with subjective self-perception. Categorizing others inevitably goes hand in hand with self-categorization. The fact that others belong to the same group or to a different group than you tells something about your social identity. Self-categorization is part of the self-schemas that people have. People value themselves on the basis of self-schemas and self-images. The self-image contains both affective and more cognitive elements. It is about our motivations, about drives, about strong and weak characteristics, about our relationship with others, about beliefs and memories, opinions, and interests. In order to be able to process all the information about ourselves, we use self-schemas to regulate the mutual relationship between the different elements of the self-images: what is really characteristic of me, which role is dominant, which behaviours and preferences belong to what role, and so on. Self-images and self-schemas are multiple in nature. This means that there are not only sub-selves ('I belong to the Christians but, within that, also to the Protestants'), but also current and desired selves,³ including possible, ideal, imposed, or future selves. The individual has to manage with these different selves.⁴ The ideal and ought selves are often based upon religious beliefs or other normative identities. A religious person can be aware of his or her shortcomings before God, but can also reflect on the ideal Christian version of him or herself. Parts of this ideal religious self belong to the self-schema. Moreover, these multiple self-schemas consist partly of explicit and conscious self-knowledge, and partly of more implicit and unconscious knowledge. Explicit self-beliefs are reflected and therefore adjustable or controllable. Implicit parts of our self-beliefs are automatic and less controllable.

3 H. Markus and P. Nurius, "Possible Selves," *American Psychologist*, 41 (1986): 954–969.

4 E.T. Higgins, "Self-discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect," *Psychological Review*, 94 (1987): 319–340.

The concept of self-schemas is also resonant with Social Identity Theory (SIT), where Sonia Roccas and Marilynn Brewer⁵ have introduced the concept of social identity complexity – a new theoretical construct that refers to an individual's subjective representation of the interrelationships among his or her multiple group identities. Both concepts, social identity complexity and self-schemas, reflect the need of individuals to be able to respond adequately to changing circumstances, appealing to different elements of themselves. As an individual, you must constantly be able to quickly determine whether and how something is important to you, which role should be dominant in this, which strategies you have at your disposal, and what you know about previous situations. A multiple self-schema helps with this. If a self-schema consists of just one main identity, and that identity gets lost, a risk to mental health will occur. For example, people who identify themselves exclusively with their job or with their role as parent/partner can develop serious mental problems such as depression if that one identity is lost.

So, we can conclude that the self-schema is an important part of both the self-image and self-esteem of the person.

When people belong to a minority group, membership of that group often forms an important part of the self-schema.⁶ This is the case with 'neutral' minorities such as gender; if people are asked to describe themselves, they emphasize their gender if that is an exception within the specific context. The importance of minority identity for the self-schema is certainly the case if it is about more normative minority groups such as religion. Someone's religious identity can be a very dominant social identity. The more a religious identity is a personal choice, the stronger the dominance. Research on converts⁷ shows that they often divide the entire narrative of their biography into before and after conversion; conversion then becomes the pivotal point of life and a very important social identity. Being a minority is not a neutral social description; it has consequences for self-esteem.

Self-Identity Theory and self-categorization are part of the social identity approach.⁸ Self-categorization is an inevitable part of categorizing society as a whole. If you divide society into religious minorities or a religious or secular majority, you will always belong to one of those categories yourself as well. In social psychology, this is referred to as the difference between the ingroup, to which you belong, versus the outgroup, of which you are not a part. Ingroup and outgroup are not neutral objective categories in the sense that they are only descriptions of the social groups to which someone does and does not belong. Research shows that people tend to evaluate the characteristics of the group to which they do not

5 S. Roccas and M.B. Brewer, "Social Identity Complexity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 6.2 (2002): 88–106.

6 W.J. McGuire, and C.V. McGuire, "The Spontaneous Self-concept as Affected by Personal Distinctiveness," in *The Self-concept*, ed. M.D. Lynch, A. Norem-Hebeisen and K. Gergen (New York: Ballinger, 1981), 147–171.

7 L.R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

8 M.J. Hornsey, "Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory: A Historical Review," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2.1 (2008): 204–222.

belong (outgroup) more negatively than the characteristics of the ingroup.⁹ This is of course a fairly logical fact if we relate it to the concept of self-perception as discussed before. From that perspective, the role of social identity can be considered as part of the self-schema in relation to self-esteem. Human beings tend to strive for a positive self-evaluation.

Characteristics are usually attributed to an entire group via the average or prototypical member of that group. If the ingroup prototype exhibits the characteristic, we assume that all group members have that characteristic. In leadership theories, this mechanism is related to leadership being perceived as a form of social identification in and of itself.¹⁰ If the leader is perceived as an ingroup champion, or an ingroup prototype, leadership results in *making us matter*: the individual group members reflect the prototypical characteristics of the leader.

Observed or attributed group characteristics differ in variability.¹¹ If the variation is low, we assume that there are few exceptions within the group in question; high variability means that we assume that there are many exceptions or individual differences. An example of low variability is the assumption that all Christians are kind and forgiving; if the variability is high, we think that there are many individual differences between Christians and that it will differ per situation as to how loving or forgiving a believer is. Since it is cognitively not possible to determine all characteristics of an ingroup or outgroup ourselves, we learn these characteristics through transfer and teaching by others. ‘Others’ is a broad concept here, including close relations, media, general knowledge, or gossip. The characteristics about a group can be transferred by what is called abstraction-based or instance-based transference. Abstraction-based characteristics are acquired by generalized conceptions about the group from a variety of sources, like personal experiences with group members and learning from friends and media. Instance-based characteristics are directly related to concrete and individual behaviour of group members. Although very obvious, it is good to realize that abstraction-based transmitted characteristics of a group are more likely to be found in the outgroup, and also more likely to have a low variation. This phenomenon is known as outgroup homogeneity: we base our knowledge of the outgroup on general statements, and we assume that all members of the outgroup will display these characteristics under all circumstances. Instance-based transmitted characteristics, on the other hand, inevitably have a higher variation (because they are based on concrete examples) and are more likely to occur in the ingroup. This is the so-called ingroup heterogeneity: we know many individual cases and considerations and we are prepared to make room for exceptions.

9 A lot of research on this was done in the 1990s; see for an overview B. Mullen, R. Brown, and C. Smith, “Ingroup Bias as a Function of Salience, Relevance, and Status: An Integration,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (1992): 103–122.

10 S.A. Haslam, S.D. Reicher, and M.J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2020).

11 B. Park, and R. Hastie, “Perception of Variability in Category Development: Instance- Versus Abstraction-based Stereotypes,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (1987): 621–635.

This set of differences between observations and evaluations of the ingroup and the outgroup is also called the ingroup bias. In social intercourse, we are constantly inclined to judge the ingroup more positively than the outgroup, which is reinforced by the outgroup homogeneity and the ingroup heterogeneity. This ingroup bias occurs in both minority and majority groups, but it is interesting that the bias is smaller for a minority. The threat to identity of low minority status can often strengthen solidarity with the ingroup, leading to a form of ingroup homogeneity.¹²

Minority and Stereotyping: the Societal Level

We have seen that in the self-schema, social identity plays an important role for self-esteem and self-evaluation. Given the human inclination to self-enhancement, the ingroup bias is not surprising. Ingroup characteristics are more positively evaluated, the perceived variability is higher, and this knowledge is instance-based, leaving room for exceptions.

The striving for a subjective positive social identity can be understood within the paradigm of SIT and Social Identity Complexity Theory (SICT), theories used as a framework by a number of authors in this volume. SIT is one of the social science theories that is widely used as a hermeneutical tool by biblical scholars. Within this paradigm, the human pursuit of belonging to a certain group is seen in the light of the need for self-esteem. The social identity should enforce the individual self-evaluation. To achieve this, one's own group must be positively distinguished from other groups. This can happen in two ways, namely by overvaluing the own group, or by devaluing the other group or groups, as is stated in SIT.¹³

This dynamic shows that the mechanism of ingroup bias does not only have consequences on an individual level. People know more about their own group, and they often value their own group more positively than the way they value the other group. This leads to ingroup favouritism. This concept refers in the first place to favouring members of the ingroup over members of the outgroup in the distribution of resources (time, money, jobs, opportunities, etc.) in a literal sense. In a more abstract way, ingroup favouritism also refers to attribution differences for ingroup and outgroup. It is a well-known phenomenon within social psychology that in the case of negative events, people tend to make external attributions by referring to external factors that have led to the negative outcome. Conversely, in the case of positive events, people tend to make internal attributions, which leads to positive self-esteem. Jordan Robbins and Joachim Krueger¹⁴ reveal in their review and meta-analysis of social projection – the tendency to expect similarities between oneself and others – that bias is stronger when people make judgements

12 N. Ellemers, R. Spears, and B. Doosje, "Self and Social Identity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002): 161–186.

13 SIT is discussed in other contributions as well. Tajfel is one of the founders; see, for example, H. Tajfel, ed., *Differentiation Between Social Groups* (London: Academic Press, 1978).

14 J.M. Robbins and J.I. Krueger, "Social Projection to Ingroups and Outgroups: A Review and Meta-Analysis," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 9.1 (2005): 32–47.

about their ingroup compared to judgements about the outgroup. This inequality in attribution does not only take place on the level of the individual; it also applies to the group level. Positive events or successes are attributed to the ingroup, negative events or results are due to the outgroup. To complicate it a bit further, this mechanism is reinforced by the phenomenon of linguistic intergroup bias.¹⁵ This means that positive behaviour of ingroup members is described more abstractly than the positive behaviour of outgroup members, and vice versa: negative behaviour of ingroup members involves more specific language than negative behaviour of outgroup members. And since abstract descriptions are generally more likely to be attributed to a person and more specific language is associated with a situation, this is a self-reinforcing effect. In terms of negative behaviour of a member of the ingroup, many influences on the situation can be imagined (external attribution); for negative behaviour of a member of the outgroup, this does not apply, in which case internal attribution will follow with a link to a personal characteristic. This results in an exemplary case that a member of the ingroup is said to display unreliable behaviour, while – demonstrating the same behaviour – the member of the outgroup is, due to that behaviour, seen as an unreliable person.

The Terror Management Theory¹⁶ provides the phenomenon of ingroup favouritism with an existential dimension by pointing to its connection with the fear of one's own mortality. This fear can be so enormous and existential that as human beings, we seek assurance that our own lives have meaning. One of the most obvious ways to do this is to revalue our own cultural values and groups and/or to devalue the other group or groups. Increased ingroup favouritism is a logical consequence. By favouring the ingroup over the outgroup in both a literal and figurative sense, we increase the benefits for ourselves. Individual fear of death is thus mitigated by being part of a group that is valued by that individual very positively, and that will continue to exist even after the individual is dead. In this way, the ingroup transcends your own individual mortality. Moreover, the stronger the ingroup becomes, the more it will serve the deep-rooted need for belonging and connectedness. In short, the more life itself comes under pressure, the greater the importance of the ingroup will become and the stronger the ingroup will be set against the outgroup. This mechanism is a well-known phenomenon in groups that become more fundamentalist and even radicalized.

Minority and (Mental) Health and Behaviour

We have already noted that belonging to a religious minority is an important part of one's social identity. Since a minority is more likely to be threatened – both literally and figuratively – than a majority, a minority will also be more likely to accept

15 A. Maass, R. Ceccarelli, and S. Rudin, "Linguistic Intergroup Bias: Evidence for Ingroup-Protective Motivation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71 (1996): 512–526.

16 See for an overview J. Greenberg, S.L. Koole, and T. Pyszczynski, eds., *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology* (New York/London: The Guilford Press, 2004).

or even justify violent or otherwise violent behaviour against members of the majority to cope with these threats. Self-defence and defence of one's own group and identity form the justification for this acceptance. Human beings are highly prepared to avoid the negative consequences of the threats to one's own group that are important and influential for self-identity and self-evaluation.

It is good to keep in mind that perceived threats to the ingroup, especially when they concern a minority, are not necessarily objective or actual facts. The Relative Deprivation Theory¹⁷ shows that mutual social comparison can lead to the devaluation of one's own group and the valuation of the other, often dominant, group. Both real and subjectively experienced threats to one's own group, the minority, are averted by negatively framing the outgroup, the majority, and even displaying negative social behaviour. One's own values are protected and increased by negatively assessing the other. Critical reviews of the Relative Deprivation Theory¹⁸ point out that this theory fails to explain the differences in individual behavioural choices, but the relation between belonging to a minority and social comparison is very recognizable.

Whether belonging to a religious minority also means that one is confronted with discrimination and exclusion depends very much on the specific context. However, the connection between discrimination and belonging to a religious minority is very common and widespread. A 2012 study¹⁹ shows that in the context of Christian privilege in the United States, students from marginalized minority religions (or those who did not identify with any organized religion) face significant challenges on campuses and throughout society. University satisfaction varies as a function of religious affiliation, with Protestant students having the highest satisfaction scores. This may not be discrimination in the narrow sense, but belonging to a minority religion is therefore disadvantageous and requires extra effort to achieve good results.

If there is discrimination, this often leads to increased stress. At the same time, many studies show that religion can be a good and constructive coping mechanism. Belonging to a religious minority can therefore lead to negative effects on mental health, which do not necessarily have to have major consequences given the coping function of religion.²⁰

17 Originated by W.G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice: A Study of Attitudes towards Social Inequality in Twentieth-Century England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); widely spread and accepted in social psychology afterwards.

18 See I. Walker, and T. Pettigrew, "Relative Deprivation Theory: An Overview and Conceptual Critique," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 23 (2011): 301–310.

19 N.A. Bowman and J.L. Small, "Exploring a Hidden Form of Minority Status: College Students' Religious Affiliation and Well-being," *Journal of College Student Development* 53 (2012): 491–509.

20 See for an overview K.I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1997).

Majority and Minority Influence

The existence of one or more minorities alongside a majority has consequences for the distribution of power and influence. The majority can quite easily exert power and influence on the minority.²¹ People tend to conform to the majority by accepting other people's judgements and assessments. Individual goals are subordinated to collective interests. You do not necessarily have to agree with the majority, but it prevents a lot of trouble if you can remain part of the majority group. The fact that it is a majority position can also convince people that 'they can't all be wrong.' Belonging to a majority or agreeing with the majority gives people many benefits: the conviction that you perceive the world more accurately, the appreciation and acceptance of others you respect, and the avoidance of a deviant self-concept.

However, it is not only a one-way influence; the minority can also exert influence and power on the majority. In fact, a lot of research²² shows that innovation and creativity cannot exist without the minority. By definition, minorities deviate from the majority and thus offer a different perspective. Since people tend to avoid conflict, the minority perspective will initially be seen as strange, inadequate, or even dangerous. Minority positions are easily ridiculed and rejected. Serge Moscovici²³ showed how minorities, despite these circumstances, can still exert influence. For doing so successfully, it turns out that it is crucial for the minority's behaviour to be characterized by consistency. The same issue or problem must be responded to in the same way over time, and there must be consensus so that all members of the minority group have the same response to the same issue. Moscovici's experiments²⁴ showed that a minority will not be taken seriously at all if there is no consistency. This consistency is important because the way in which a minority exerts influence differs from the way in which a majority exerts influence. Majority influence occurs through a process of comparison: it is often faster and more purposeful to adopt the majority position, which costs little cognitive capacity. For minority influence to occur, it is necessary that the minority is prepared to pay more and deeper attention to the issue in question. That takes mental capacity, and therefore time and energy, and that will only be done if there is a good reason for it. Consistency is a much stronger driver than inconsistency. This brings us back to the letter of the Apostle Peter and his call for steadfastness and impeccable behaviour, under all circumstances. A strong plea for consistency and consensus indeed.

- 21 See J.M. Levine and R.L. Moreland, "A History of Small Group Research," in *Handbook of the History of Social Psychology*, ed. A.W. Kruglanski and W. Stroebe (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 383–405.
- 22 B. Hofstra, V.V. Kulkarni, S. Munoz-Najar Galvez, B. He, D. Jurafsky, and D.A. McFarland, "The Diversity–Innovation Paradox in Science," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117.17 (2020): 9284–9291.
- 23 S. Moscovici, *Social Influence and Social Change* (London: Academic Press, 1976). See also R. Spears, "Social Influence and Group Identity," *Annual Review of Psychology* 72 (2021): 367–390.
- 24 S. Moscovici, E. Lage, and M. Naffrechoux, "Influence of Consistent Minority on the Responses of a Majority in a Color Perception Task," *Sociometry* 32 (1969): 365–380.

The results of minority influence differ from the majority variant: adapting to the majority can easily lead to superficial or merely public expressions of support; adapting as a result of the influence of the minority is more likely to lead to personal change.

Conclusion

Belonging to a religious minority is never just a purely descriptive, statistical fact. It has consequences for one's self-image. The ingroup bias predicts a lack of accuracy in valuing one's own characteristics and those of others. Religious groups should be aware of this while stressing positive parts of the minority aspect. Minority identity can also be a driver of negatively functioning stereotypes and even radicalization, with potentially high risks for society. Furthermore, minority identities correlate with mental health problems; however, religion as a system can also be a powerful psychological coping mechanism. In addition, the division between minority and majority is not a given fact for all time, since influencing dynamics and mechanisms result in an ever-continuing process of balancing between minority and majority. The division between minority and majority is not fixed in time and space; it is a dynamic and evolving balance, influenced by inter-related social, cultural, and political associations.

Given these psychological consequences, it seems wise to pay close attention to the concept of minority within theology. Thus, while emphasizing religious minority as a norm may foster a sense of positive identity, it is important to remain mindful of the broader psychological and societal implications that could potentially undermine the well-being of individuals and the harmony within the community as well. This sets the scene for the need for ongoing research in this area.

15 Resident Aliens

Theological Reflections on the Identity and Vocation of the Church as Minority in the Context of Islam

Bernhard J.G. Reitsma and Rahman Yakubu

Abstract

Three conclusions are drawn here concerning the identity and calling of the church as a minority. (1) The minority situation of the church interpreted as alien residency is not accidental, but part of the church's DNA. (2) We need a good theology of suffering and persecution that takes into consideration the liminality and vulnerability of the Christian community, and the reality of suffering as part of the identity of followers of Christ, in the hope of the final victory of Christ's glory over all evil and suffering when the faithful will be vindicated. (3) The vocation of the Christian community as a minority is not to strive for power, but to live out its alien residency to the full.

Keywords: minority, resident aliens, minoritization, vocation, identity, liminality

Introduction

The reality of being a religious minority is complex. This much seems apparent from the different contributions in this volume. Established Christian minorities are in a different position than minorities of converts from Islam (or Judaism) to Christ. The same is true for Christians in the West who used to belong to a majority and now find themselves as a minority in a multireligious and secular world. In this final contribution, we will approach the reality of the church as a minority from a theological perspective and formulate three main conclusions concerning the church's identity and calling in the context of Islam.

In the interaction with Jewish and Islamic voices, it has become clear that the reality of being a minority and the associated dynamics of minoritization and majoritization are not limited to the Christian community as a minority in the context of Islam. All religions have to deal with these minority/majority confrontations both internally and externally. They need to position themselves in relation to different interpretations of being a minority within their own traditions and in relation to different external majority contexts, religious and/or secular. It shows that we cannot engage in these discussions without intra- and interreligious interaction and conversation.

Building on the previous contributions, we will make a number of concluding theological reflections concerning the vocation and identity of the Christian community as a minority, especially in the context of Islam. First, we will consider the identity of the church as a minority; second, we will look at the place of suffering in relation to this identity; and third, we will reflect on the vocation of the Christian community as a minority. In these considerations, we need to maintain an awareness of the complexities of the reality of being a minority, as have been described and analyzed throughout this volume.

Identity: The Church as Minority¹

The first question in defining the identity of the church as a religious minority here is if the term minority is theologically adequate. It is a sociological term and does not appear in the sources of the Christian tradition and is rarely used as a theological term.² 1 Peter, for instance, does not use it. Terminology is more than just a description of a fact; it is also an interpretation of reality. That interpretation, in turn, leads to a certain posture and action. Our theological interpretation of the identity of the church as a minority therefore starts with finding which concepts describe the essence of the Christian identity as minority most aptly. What exactly do we mean by ‘minority’ and what does it imply?

Terminology

It is difficult in our world to distinguish between minority and minoritization (see Chapter 1). The term minority is hardly ever used in an objective, neutral sense. It is regularly accompanied by negative evaluations and condescending attitudes or practices and could almost be seen as a synonym for minoritization. For that reason, many Christians in a minority context view the term ‘minority’ negatively (Chapters 5 and 6). It is perceived or experienced by Christians in minority situations as indicating weakness and helplessness. They feel it is used by Christians in a majority situation (usually in the West or within a Western context) to emphasize that minority Christians cannot contribute positively to society or even survive without the support of Western Christians.³ Some Christians therefore propose

1 In this section, we use and rework different parts of Bernhard J.G. Reitsma’s inaugural lecture on liminality, see *A Clash of Civilizations Revisited. Kerk, Christelijke Theologie en de Islam*, inaugural lecture Protestant Theological University, 27 January 2025, <https://www.pthu.nl/media/downloads/redes-en-oraties/inaugurele-rede-bernhard-reitsma-2025.pdf>.

2 It is likewise not a theological term for Judaism and Islam. Even the concept of dhimmi and dhimmitude is not the same as modern ideas of numerical minorities. It refers to the system of the protection of the People of the Book within an Islamic society, namely Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (see Chapter 1, note 12).

3 See We Choose Abundant Life Group, “We Choose Abundant Life: Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices,” Beirut, September 2012, <https://online.anyflip.com/mijbx/mawd/mobile/index.html>, par. 45, 51, 57, 94. Christians feel that the threat to their existence is deepened by the minority/majority logic, par 9.

other terms, like ‘entity.’⁴ This reminds us that Christians in every context, but especially in a minority position, cannot be simply labelled by others; they can only define themselves. Any attempt to force labels upon such communities could result in a form of paternalization and colonialization. With that in mind, together with believers from different contexts, we can still try to formulate terminology that could help each of us to define ourselves as minority Christian communities.

Liminality

Employing sociological (or non-theological) terms in a theological context in order to make the connection between the Christian tradition and the present reality can be a very useful avenue of exploration. That is true for many theological notions. One of the concepts that could help us understand the reality of many marginalized minority Christians, and especially that of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs), is the concept of liminality (see Chapter 5). Liminality comes from the Latin word *limen*, which literally means ‘threshold’ and describes a position between two spaces, or a passage. Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner defined the concept ‘liminality’ as an intermediate stage in a process of transition, a transitional period with a certain provisional character and instability.⁵ Whoever finds themselves in a liminal position is in a ‘betwixt and between’ position, being neither here nor there.⁶ According to Turner, in this liminality a new kind of *communitas* originates. This in many ways characterizes the situation of Christian believers in a minority context, even if there is no minoritization and even if they do not experience it themselves always in the same way. Liminality is of course different for established minority churches than it is for communities of MBBs. The traditional churches in the Middle East have been part of society for a long time, albeit often under pressure, whereas MBBs have not. They particularly experience living between two worlds.

Tim Green compares their situation to migrants who move from one place to another on the globe. In a way, Muslims who follow Jesus have started on a journey from their old community to a different destination,⁷ drawn by the appeal Jesus

4 See Chapter 6 and Pat Brittenden, “Liberating Liminality in the Contemporary Church of Algeria,” in *Betwixt and Between: Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouche and Michael Hubbard MacKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 37–49 (48).

5 See Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909) and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1969). Changes are marked by three stages: the stage of detachment from a condition, the intermediate stage between two conditions, and landing in a new one. This applies to many pastoral situations, such as entering into a marriage, a job change, or situations of loss and mourning. Depending on the contexts, the liminal stage can be longer or shorter – or make circling motions (e.g., during a season of grief). Van Gennep also uses the term “marginality.”

6 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1969), 95–97.

7 Cf. Tim Green, “Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories,” in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library

Christ has for them. In this, they find themselves connected with the global communities of followers of Jesus Christ. At the same time, they are not able to fully identify with that new world, in particular regarding the standards and values of traditional Western Christianity. In his study, Thomas Walsh shows in his research of different MBBs in the UK that first and foremost they disconnected themselves from their community of origin to join the new one. Over the course of time, it appeared that this connection with and incorporation into the Christian community did not go as smoothly as was hoped for. The converts' deep desire for 'family' and 'community' was disappointed.⁸ Inversely, they noticed they could not – nor wished to – disconnect from their own history, even if they were not fully at home there. There is a feeling of 'betwixt and between,' a life in between two worlds, a situation of liminality. This experience is shared by many other followers of Jesus with a Muslim background.⁹ This is no less true for Christians from other backgrounds. They continue to participate in their social structures and cannot deny their genealogy, DNA, or ethnicity, yet are also part of a different community. The concept of liminality describes the struggle for identity: who are we? Where do we belong? The answer requires identity negotiation.¹⁰

Social Identity Complexity Theories describe how people deal with the inherent tensions between different often colliding identities through dominance, compartmentalization, intersection, or merger (Chapter 4). Green builds on this by socially and psychologically distinguishing between different layers of identity. The collective identity is how the community one belongs to is seen in the eyes of the surrounding environment, social identity is the identity I take from the (key persons in the) group to which I belong, and core identity describes my deepest being as a personal choice, a gained identity. When one's core identity changes, this can only be sustained if the tension between collective and social identities is not strained too much. This is difficult in those societies where there is a tendency to equate religious, social, and public identities. Then being Armenian, for instance, implies being Christian, or being Turk is the same as being Muslim. These examples can

Publishing, 2013), 41–51 (41, 42); Thomas J. Walsh, "Longing for Family: Experiences of Converts from a Muslim Background and Challenges Facing the British Christian Community as it Welcomes Them" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 51.

8 In fact, the expectation was for the new religious community to replace their old families; see Thomas J. Walsh, "Longing for Family: Experiences of Converts from a Muslim Background and Challenges Facing the British Christian Community as it Welcomes Them" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 181, who shows that this did not happen in quite a number of instances.

9 Algerian MBBs describe three liminal polarities: between the central Islamic Arabism and the double marginality of being a Christian with a Kabyle heritage, between the particularity of the emerging religious pluralism in Algeria and the formal Algerian nationalism, and between East and West. Pat Brittenden, "Liberating Liminality in the Contemporary Church of Algeria," in *Betwixt and Between: Liminality and Marginality: Mind the Gap*, ed. Zohar Hadromi-Allouche and Michael Hubbard MacKay (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 38.

10 Thomas J. Walsh, "Longing for Family: Experiences of Converts from a Muslim Background and Challenges Facing the British Christian Community as it Welcomes Them" (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2023), 163.

be multiplied by many. Changing one's religion would in these situations be felt as treason, if not against society as a whole, then at least as a betrayal or rejection of the extended family.

The sociological terms of minority and liminality describe the identity and position of MBBs very well, but also resonate with Christians in other minority situations who are living with both their national, ethnic, social, or cultural identity and their Christian identity. These two identities seem to be more conflicting in minority situations. Even Western Christians who used to be a numerical majority but are now becoming a numerical minority can feel the tension between Christian identity and other, broader identities. The example from one of the focus groups (Chapter 6) of a Christian in the Netherlands who was hesitant to raise their children in a Christian way in case it isolated them from society is telling.

Resident Aliens

We might wonder how this sociological term liminality operates in a theological context. If we listen to the different studies and discussions of 1 Peter (Chapters 2–6), the term liminality seems to resonate with what 1 Peter says about the Christian community. Believers are sojourners or aliens and exiles (πάροικος καὶ παρεπίδημος). Where the sociological term liminality emphasizes in-betweenness, the concepts of sojourners and aliens or exiles combine the notion of strangeness with the notion of residency. Someone who resides with others (πάροικος) is not a stranger in general (ξένος) or a visiting foreigner (tourist), but someone who is allowed to stay, without legal possession of territory. The term παρεπίδημος points in a similar way to exile, living outside your own territory. Believers are so to say 'resident aliens in exile' (The Passion Translation). This has a different dimension to it than both liminality and minority. With these two concepts – resident and alien – 1 Peter defines the identity of believers in Jesus Christ as residing in a world to which they do not fully belong. They still belong to this world according to their genealogy, ethnicity, history, and nationality. A new identity 'does not negate one's identity as Roman or Jewish' (Chapter 4).¹¹ Still, the core identity of Christians is defined by their belonging to God. There is not just an in-between or even an in-both, there is also an 'in-beyond.'¹² The theological terminology transcends the sociological, and the faith reality goes beyond the social reality.

11 Miroslav Volf calls this a soft difference between the two worlds; see Chapter 4. See also Tim Green, "Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories," in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?*, ed. David Greenlee (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library Publishing, 2013), 44–48.

12 Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) emphasizes the marginality of all-inclusive theology and urges not to turn the margins into a new centre but to embrace marginality as transcending the opposition of margins and centres. That is, being "in-beyond." Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), ch. 3, 55–76.

What makes the notion of resident aliens different from ‘liminality’ is that the idea describes the believer as being part of two worlds in unequal ways. The value of being part of the new life in Christ as a royal priesthood is not of the same value as being resident in this world. The deep connection of Christians to God fundamentally redefines and transcends (not negates or nullifies) the earthly connections and realities (Chapter 4).¹³ As strangers in this world, groaning with the whole creation (Rom. 8:22, 23 ESV), they have been transferred from the domain of darkness to the domain of the kingdom of the beloved Son (Col. 1:13 ESV). Baptism as the ritual of Christian liminality illustrates this transfer from the old life to the new: dying with Christ leads to being raised with him to new life.

Secondly, being a resident alien (having a liminal identity) is not permanent. It is only permanent in this age. It will change when Christ is revealed (1 Pet. 1:7), when all things will be made new. Christians have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3). So, the liminality is in a way an interim period.

MBBs in the focus groups (Chapter 6) express their feelings that 1 Peter – particularly Chapter 2 – seemed written especially for them. The epistle helps them to make sense of their experience, both in terms of identity and suffering (see next section). It brings so much more than just a description of their reality between their old world and the new. It provides them with a solid identity that is rooted in Christ, not in their earthly reality or even in Christianity. God has called them to be ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession’ (1 Pet. 2:9 ESV). What is seen in their environment as dishonourable, namely following Jesus and becoming a minority and minoritized persons, in the eyes of God is an honourable reality. And that is not only true for MBBs, but also for other Christian minority groups who consider their situation as poor and weak. In this vein, the document *We Choose Abundant Life*, written by Christians from the Middle East,¹⁴ emphasizes the value of Christians in minority positions in the Middle East. There is a need to deconstruct any form of minority complex and underline the value of every person as a human being and equal citizen.¹⁵ No person is without influence or meaning. Martin Accad calls this the need to deminoritize Christians and build strong identities.¹⁶

This, however, also extends beyond the situation of the addressees of 1 Peter or MBBs. For 1 Peter, the strangeness of believers in the world is the result of their

13 If the identity in Christ is dominant, in terms of social identity complexity theories, 1 Peter stresses dominance or merger.

14 *We Choose Abundant Life* was written by specialists in theology and human and geopolitical sciences.

15 We Choose Abundant Life Group, “We Choose Abundant Life: Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices,” Beirut, September 2012, <https://online.anyflip.com/mijbx/mawd/mobile/index.html>, par. 32, 57.

16 See for instance, Martin Accad, “Theological Education as Formation for Prophetic Ministry,” Arab Theological Seminary, 2 March 2027, <https://abtslebanon.org/2017/03/02/theological-education-as-formation-for-prophetic-ministry/>.

connection to Jesus Christ. It is not simply the result of social circumstances, but of their faith in Christ. When the believers started to follow Jesus, they moved from the Hellenistic or Jewish world to the Christian community and became strangers in their own environment as a result. They did not leave their environment, but have become outsiders in their context. This is the difference between the sociological and the theological interpretation of minority and liminality. In sociological perspective, being liminal is accidental and random; it could happen to anyone. In a theological framework, being a resident alien is inherent to being Christian.¹⁷ The identity of believers is not determined by circumstances, by ambivalent realities, but by their attachment to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:18–23). Jesus is the marginalized liminal person par excellence. He did not let the political and religious powers hijack him for their cause. He was rejected by all. The cross was for him the ultimate liminality, literally hanging between heaven and earth, rejected by both, the apex of his exile. The resurrection points beyond liminality, while it vindicated Jesus as the saviour of the world, whose glory will be revealed at the end of time (cf. 1 Pet. 4:13; 5:1). The liminal situation of MBBs is a constant reminder to the worldwide Christian community, maybe particularly those in majority or majoritizing positions, of this reality as resident aliens. It challenges all to embrace alien residency.¹⁸

Our first conclusion is therefore that the minority situation of the church interpreted as alien residency is not accidental, but part of the church's DNA. That is not a dishonourable situation, but honourable.

Suffering: The Church Minoritized

The experience of liminality is in itself already a form of suffering. The constant struggle MBBs have with who they really are, where they belong, on which side of the bridge they find themselves, or on neither, never really being at home, is unsettling. However, it is more than that. Many MBBs are vulnerable to persecution. This is what the participants in the Come Follow Me (CFM) course (Chapter 5) and the members of different focus groups express (Chapter 6). Even though not all MBBs suffer in the same way from discrimination or persecution, it is not unfounded to claim that the participants of the focus groups and the CFM course

17 Turner interprets this as indicating that in Christianity liminality has become permanent. See Marcel Barnard, "Flows of Worship in the Network Society: Liminality as Heuristic Concept in Practical Theology beyond Action Theory," *In die Skriflig* 44.1 (2010): 67–84 (70, 71) who refers to Turner (1995), 107, 110.

18 Atef Gendy, "A Fruitful Minority: Biblical Reflections in the Context of the Evangelical Church of Egypt," in *Fruitful Minorities: The Witness and Service of Christian Communities in Predominantly Islamic Societies*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2018), 15–22, posits that minority status can reveal the essence of the gospel (22). In a similar vein, Bdaïwi claims that the truth is with the minority (Chapter 13 above). The difference with our position here is that Bdaïwi thinks of a numerical minority, while we emphasize here liminality even in majority situations.

are in some way representative of the majority of Muslim converts to Christianity in a minority position. Different reports all show a similar pattern. Muslims who leave their religion and religious community are often considered infidels or traitors, bringing shame on their religion and family.¹⁹

Numerical minorities in general are vulnerable to minoritization, although the context matters greatly. Established minorities, like Arab Christians or Christians in the West in a minority position, have different experiences than converts from Islam to Christianity or Christian minorities under authoritarian regimes. It is important to also point out here that this experience is not limited to Christian minorities. Different groups of Muslims can relate similar stories of persecution. The situation of the Jewish people and the history of antisemitism, in the West resulting in the Holocaust, needs no further explanation. All of this shows that besides religious convictions or numbers there are many other aspects to the suffering of believers. In different contributions, social identity (complexity) theories are used to explain the different dynamics (Chapters 2 and 4).²⁰

1 Peter, however, pushes beyond the social aspect of the suffering of the Christian community. Ultimately, suffering for the author of 1 Peter is not the result of regimes that consider Christians a threat to their authority or because the social community feels ashamed of converts to Christianity. Suffering is a theological reality. It is an essential mark of the Christian faith and belongs to the DNA of the Christian community. Christlikeness includes the cross. Bought with the blood of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:19), the Christian identity is marked by Christ's self-sacrifice from the beginning (1 Pet. 2:21, 24, 25). The Messiah is a suffering servant, and that suffering is reflected in the suffering of the Christian community. Believers have received life because Jesus died. The suffering of the believers that 1 Peter addresses is related to their identity, not their behaviour. They have become liminal because they have embraced a strange faith, which has made them outsiders and vulnerable to minoritization.

Myriam Klinker-De Klerck points to the aspect of honour and shame here (Chapter 3). In the Eastern world, suffering is considered dishonourable. With social creativity, however, 1 Peter turns that around. Suffering is not a shame; it rather confirms the honourable position of the Christian community as a chosen race, a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). It shows that the believers are true followers of Christ, and it actually reveals their true identity. Suffering is not pointless, but part of a larger narrative that will culminate in the revelation of Christ's glory. Then all suffering will be taken away, and believers will no longer be aliens abroad, but children at home.

19 See for instance Ziya Meral, *No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam and Failures of International Community* (London: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2008).

20 See also Jack Barentsen, "Apostasy: A Social Identity Perspective," in *Religiously Exclusive, Socially Inclusive: A Religious Response*, ed. Bernhard Reitsma and Erika van Nes-Visscher (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 53–67.

The Church without Suffering?

The question is, then, what does it mean for Christians – minority or majority – who are not being persecuted that suffering is part of the DNA of the church? Is this appeal a hidden glorification of suffering? Does it mean that Christians need to strive after persecution and glorify in it? That is not what 1 Peter – nor the MBB community – is saying. The joy is not in suffering itself, but in being guarded by God's power through faith (1 Pet. 1:5).

Two things can be said to this difference between persecuted Christians and established Christians who are not being persecuted. First, when Christians have no personal experience of suffering or persecution, there is still the relationship with the other members of the household of God. There are always believers in that worldwide community who do suffer. As Paul would say, when one member suffers, it affects all (1 Cor. 12:26). That is also true here. In this way, what 1 Peter is saying is not an isolated perspective, but in different circumstances true for all Christians.

Secondly, Paul in his letters does not make a firm distinction between suffering in general and persecution in particular.²¹ For him, both are an expression of the fact that creation is 'subjected to futility' and 'in bondage to decay' (Rom. 8:20, 21, NIV). The reality of the new life in Christ, in which sin and death have been conquered, clashes with the powers of the old age. This can be through the suffering of creation, which is also the result of sin and corruption, or through the resistance of people against this new community of faith.²² Therefore, all Christians suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with Christ (Rom. 8:17). That resonates with what Peter says and with the testimonies of the believers in the different contributions to this volume. Suffering is suffering in hope (1 Pet. 1:3), suffering in the pain of birth and not in the pain of death (Rom. 8:22). This broken creation is not the ultimate destination of Christians. That will be the revelation of the glory of Christ, a glorious perspective.

Building Resilience

One of the repeated concerns voiced by participants in the focus groups and in the conversation about the CFM course was the need to equip Christians in the face of suffering and persecution (Chapter 5). If liminality, understood as being a resident alien, is the core quality of the identity of the Christian community and if suffering belongs to the DNA of the church, one of the most important tasks of churches is to equip and train their members to understand and embrace this reality of the Christian life. That can be quite countercultural, not only for Western

21 Cf. Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, *Vulnerable Love: Islam, the Church and the Triune God* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020), ch. 9, 133–149.

22 In real life, it is also difficult to distinguish between persecution and suffering as a result of the corruption of creation. When someone contracts pneumonia in prison, it is suffering as the consequence of a broken creation, but initiated through persecution. In that sense, it is always a complex reality.

Christians, but also for many MBBs or in minority positions. It takes courage to teach the reality of the church as a minority, instead of ‘dreaming of full churches.’ It requires building ‘this mindset in the next generations, that it is ok to be different’ (Chapter 6). Such a mindset can help with being more resilient in the face of adversities.

In summary, our second theological conclusion here is that we need a theology of suffering and persecution that takes into consideration the liminality and vulnerability of the Christian community, the reality of suffering as part of the identity of followers of Christ, and the hope of the final victory of Christ’s glory over all evil and suffering when the faithful will be vindicated. Until then, Christ’s power sustains the minoritized church. Such a theology does not create easy escapes and challenges different forms of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel.²³

Vocation: The Mission of the Church

The question that is present explicitly or implicitly in relation to being a minority is what the calling of the church should be. How can minorities, minoritized or not, participate in and contribute positively to society? What is the mission of the church?

Contextualization

It is interesting to see how Elias El Halabi emphasizes that being a minority does not imply lack of influence on society. On the contrary, he claims that Arab Christianity influenced Islam and contributed to shaping the Arab culture (as Islam influenced Christianity and the culture) (Chapter 10). What is the secret to this positive influence?²⁴

One thing that characterizes the Arab Church is that it is fully present in the fabric of society. That is partially due to the age-long presence of Christians in the Middle East, dating from before the Islamic conquest. The church is not an alien presence, but very contextual: it is Arab.²⁵ ‘Arab Christians were not passive victims of history but active participants who reshaped their identity, contributed to their society, and adapted to the changing political landscape’ (Chapter 10). This flexibility made it possible to be rooted in culture and society. At the same time, the community did not lose the essence of its Christian identity and message. The age-old liturgy has been a stabilizing factor. It helped prevent Islamization, a not unimaginable risk in contextualization. The same is true for the direct theological

23 See Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, *Vulnerable Love: Islam, the Church and the Triune God* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020), 148, 149.

24 Bdaiwi seems to indicate something similar for Shi’a Islam; see Chapter 13 above.

25 That could be one of the reasons for the disappearance of the church in North Africa, which was also present before Islam but did not take root as in Lebanon or Egypt. See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 34, 35.

and philosophical and sometimes apologetic discussions theologians had with Muslims, to explain, discuss, and defend the Christian faith. In this way Christianity also contributed to the development of Islam as did Islam to the development of Christianity (Chapter 10).

Is what is true for (established) minority communities like Arab Christians or Christians in the West also true for minoritized Christians? Their impact on the structures of society will probably be different, but on an individual or smaller communal level they can still have meaningful influence. The vocation is in all circumstances to be contextual without losing the essence of their Christian contribution. Lesslie Newbigin speaks in this respect about true contextualization as living with the tension between the domestication of the gospel (where the gospel simply confirms the present culture) and complete alienation (where the gospel becomes irrelevant to the context).²⁶ For MBBs, this is quite a challenge. They share their genealogy, their ethnicity, their religious upbringing, and their culture with their society and their previous communities. At the same time, they are estranged from these communities through their faith in Jesus Christ. How can they find the right way of living with this tension, or the right way to contextualize their lives without giving up their unique new identity? However, this vocation is not reserved for MBBs or vulnerable minorities. It is the same for every believer in every culture, even when the church is more established. The temptation to domesticate the gospel might be even stronger. All are attracted to settle for an easy life and to assimilate to the culture and the values of the world around. If that temptation can be resisted, it is not impossible also for minoritized believers who are not part of the fabric of society like Arab Christianity, to positively participate in and witness to a non-Christian environment. It requires what Wilbert van Saane and George AlSahili call incarnational relationships (Chapter 11). It requires vision and prophetic courage.²⁷

Mission and Apologetics

One question is raised by the example of Aphrahat. Aphrahat considered the temptation to turn away from the Christian faith stronger in relation to the Judaistic attack on Christians than in relation to the pressure of persecution (Chapter 9). So, his instruction regarding the Christian faith and the deconstruction of the Jewish faith was not unreasonable in order to strengthen the Christian community. MBBs sometimes encounter similar temptations to turn back to Islam in the face of harsh conditions in relation to their previous community and disappointing experiences

26 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), ch. 12, 141–154, esp. 142–144.

27 We Choose Abundant Life Group, “We Choose Abundant Life: Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices,” Beirut, September 2012, <https://online.anyflip.com/mijbx/mawd/mobile/index.html>, par. 51.

with their new Christian community. Apologetically equipping them and deconstructing the Islamic system makes sense.

The question, however, is if this would not inevitably lead to enmity and polarization. How might we engage in a constructive theological debate between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, as in this volume, when apologetics tries to safeguard primarily one's own identity? Polarization in itself does not always have to be negative if it comes to countering evil, but it can be destructive for an inclusive society. The same question can be asked in relation to mission. How can the church share the essence of its identity with others, without becoming antagonistic? Preaching and teaching are at the heart of the vocation of the Christian church. As a royal priesthood and a holy nation, Christians are chosen to proclaim 'the mighty acts' (NRSV) or 'excellencies' (ESV) (τὰς ἀρετὰς) of God (1 Pet. 2:9). It does not matter whether the church is a minority or a majority, even when the specific form will differ. Can the gospel be communicated to others without losing connective inclusivity? Or does it always lead to antagonism?

From the perspective of 1 Peter, witnessing to the essence of the gospel and explaining that apologetically is a response to those who ask, not an uninvited attack, and should always be done with gentleness (πραΰτης) and respect or – literally – fear (φόβος) (1 Pet. 3:15, 16). Mission should be Christlike, and that means marked by the life and suffering of Jesus Christ. Christian mission or apologetics can never be linked to power and manipulation; it should never be aggressive or disrespectful. Witness according to 1 Peter only comes from living a Christlike life. In the light of the cross, we could conclude that every person on this earth is equal in the sight of God, all in need of the same grace. It also implies that judgement does not belong to the Christian community; it belongs to God only.²⁸

In this respect, we need to continue the discussion on decolonizing mission. Harvey Kwiyani has shown how Western Christian mission was intrinsically linked to European colonialism and vice versa.²⁹ He emphasizes that true mission 'does not need to depend on human empires.'³⁰ In other words, mission does not need earthly power and force. We might even say that whenever the (spreading of the) gospel was associated with or linked to power, the mission and life of the church derailed.

That strengthens the conviction of 1 Peter that minoritization is not an obstacle for the mission of the church, but even strengthens it. Mission can only be done in grace and humility, without human power and manipulation, for it is only God who can change human hearts. Van Klinken has shown that according to 1 Peter, it is exactly in suffering that this kind of (decolonized) mission becomes visible. When Christians endure persecution and suffering, they follow in the footsteps of Jesus (1 Pet. 2:21), who endured suffering and did not retaliate (1 Pet. 2:22–24).

28 See Bernhard J.G. Reitsma, *Vulnerable Love: Islam, the Church and the Triune God* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020), 165–167.

29 Harvey Kwiyani, *Decolonizing Mission* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2025), 16.

30 Harvey Kwiyani, *Decolonizing Mission* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2025), 5.

That example is a perfect witness to Jesus Christ and to the gospel. Therefore, it is good to hear the warning of some participants in the focus groups that a declining church in the West or a minority church in the East should not be tempted to regain what was lost.

There is one other tension concerning the vocation of the church as resident aliens. There is a clash between the principles of the new life they have entered and the evil that is present in the reality of everyday life, between righteousness and injustice. The liminal church is caught up in the middle. As the new community of God, the church challenges the powers of the earth if only by its existence. Yet at the same time, Christians are called by 1 Peter to be subject to every human institution and authority (1 Pet. 2:13, 14, ESV). How is it possible to prophetically speak truth to power, reveal the darkness in this world, and at the same time be subject citizens?

This prophetic dimension of speaking truth to power is not meant as a power struggle with authorities and governments. It is the truth of the gospel of the suffering servant that upturns all powers. If we realize that, it helps to prevent us falling into a paternalistic trap. Doing good – as 1 Peter encourages Christians to do – is prophetic, even though it is vulnerable. Part of that vulnerability is speaking up in the face of injustice. That is prophetic preaching (Chapter 11) and belongs to obedience to Christ. What value is there in the gospel if the church does not speak truth to power? When that kind of vulnerable prophetic speaking is likely to lead to suffering at the hands of unjust powers, it is part of a Christlike identity. When suffering is the result of stupidity or unnecessarily irritating the authorities, obviously that does not count as Christlike suffering.

In short, our third conclusion is that the calling of the church as a minority is not to strive for power, but to live out its alien residency to the full. That requires transcending ‘in-betweenness’ and ‘being in-both,’ by building a strong identity in Christ.

Conclusion

The church as a minority is a vulnerable community in the face of the powers and resistance of this world. Although we have discussed particularly the interaction between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (in different orders), this is true for numerical Christian minorities in any context. Yet that weakness is the church’s strength. Power to persevere comes from God through the suffering Messiah, and therefore the identity and survival of the Christian community are not rooted in circumstances – either good or bad – but in Christ himself. His power helps the Christian community to persevere in times of suffering. As a royal priesthood and a holy nation, they are called to proclaim the excellencies of him who called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9, ESV).

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