Abstract
In the face of discrimination towards minorities in Europe and the increasing exclusion of immigrants, this essay takes up the Gospel witness of inclusive table fellowship and the multi-voiced and polyphonic voices in Acts. The New Testament shows how the apostolic community shifted from uniformity to pluriformity. The Church, then, is to witness as an inclusive community of hospitality open to ‘the other’ which enriches the Church’s polyphonic identity which cannot be reduced to any single set of ethnic or cultural characteristics. The essay then takes up alternative ways in which the Church relates to the State: by assimilation, critical distance (rather than alienation) and critical solidarity (involvement) concluding that the Church needs to live in solidarity with minorities becoming the voice of the voiceless.

Keywords
Minorities, plurality, ‘the other’, critical solidarity.

Introduction
There is a difference between English and German as to the use of the term “minority”. The English word minority has several meanings. It can for example mean (a) less than half of a larger group (in German = Minderheit), or b) a group facing or in danger of facing discrimination (in German = Minorität). In German it is possible to distinguish between the two meanings by using two different words (Minderheit and Minorität), but not in English since the word minority covers both meanings. In this paper the focus is on minority rather than Minderheit. This means that a minority is seen as a vulnerable group facing discrimination. The state has a special obligation to ensure that their feelings and rights are not offended.

One of the challenging issues in our society is the legal status of minorities (religious, national or other) within a transnational framework. The term “minority” can be defined in a broad sense including both religious and national (or ethnic) dimensions. To these two dimensions of “minority” a third dimension should be added, e.g. the social dimension. This aspect plays an important role in this contribution. To be in a minority position is often related to the experience of being an uprooted people.

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In this paper the main emphasis will be on the theological rather than the legal aspect of minorities. It is argued that the Christian community has a special task in creating a space for the others, in particular those who we define as minorities. This task is grounded in the very nature of the Christian faith. It is important to notice that the Christian church itself started as a minority group. “Throughout the Bible, the experience of exile and the treatment of strangers are used as tests of faithfulness to God, to God who sides with orphans, the widow, the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, and who, in Christ, identifies with the poor and the oppressed” (Jacques 1986).

**Confronting the challenge of exclusion**

Recent decades has witnessed the emergence of a stigmatization of foreigners in Europe. The issue of immigration has been promoted as one of the fundamental causes of the present economic and social crisis, making it one of the most controversial topics of the public debate in Europe since the end of the 1980s. How does this process of stigmatization and exclusion work? Several factors are at work (Jacques 1994: 330-331):

- the first element is the identification of the “threat” allegedly posed by foreigners. At the international level, this is portrayed in the image of an ‘invasion of Europe” by starving masses from the South and the East.
- against the background of this climate of fear, restrictive new legislation on immigration and asylum is introduced, responding to public opinion which has been deeply influenced by a general alarmist tone in official speeches by political leaders.
- this provides fertile soil for the growth of racial and xenophobic actions and ideologies. More and more people frustrated with the present and anxious about the future, come to believe that “the others” do represent a significant component of the social crisis, that they must be carefully monitored and that immigrants should be excluded from the country whenever possible.
- finally, this process of stigmatizing and excluding foreigners leads to the reinforcement of a “fortress mentality”, both nationally and regionally, which legitimates the worst individual and collective attitudes: selfishness instead of solidarity and rejection instead of sharing burdens and responsibilities.

Furthermore, it should be noticed that Christianity emerged initially in a Jewish-Christian culture. Christians have had the experience of being “strangers” and of being persecuted struggling to define themselves in the midst of dominant religious and cultural forces.
Migration has both economic and political root causes. It leads to problems of social and cultural integration, fears on both sides, and a serious lack of understanding, leading to further marginalization. Moreover, racism is a very real danger throughout Europe. By consciously excluding certain groups and discriminating against them, the European idea of having a multicultural society and community of different peoples growing together is seriously challenged (Issues of Poverty and Social Exclusion 1997: 4).

Cultural and religious pluralism has become a crucial aspect of European life. It coincides with the fact that Churches are loosing control of the attitudes and values of European population and with the arrival of new religious minorities. These minorities tend to consider that their religion does not necessarily coincide with privatised religion (Saint-Blancat 2005: 55). Religious demands for social visibility in public space are high today. They come from all religious actors, not only from Muslim associations, but also from many Christians.

To illustrate what is going in many European countries one may take the example of Denmark. In Denmark there is an ongoing and vivid debate on religion in the public sphere. Furthermore, there is the conflict between Danish people and immigrants in relation to attitudes to the welfare system. According to Ole Riis, the latter tend to use the system as consumers, the former have built it over many years with difficulties, sacrifices, hard work and political debate. It is a civil and social victory they consider as their own and want to defend (Riis quoted by Saint-Blancat 2005: 57).

We tend to place immigrants and refugees among ”outsiders” and ”wrongdoers”. Hans Raun Iversen (2004: 153) points out that over the past few years, the economic and mental conditions that Danish society has created for its immigrants have turned from bad to very bad. Strict discrimination takes place as refugees and immigrants are far from having the same civil rights and access to social benefits as ordinary Danish citizens. When the social rights of the twentieth century and even the political right of the nineteenth century are not respected in the case of immigrants in Denmark, it seems to be connected primarily to the fact that the Danes tend to behave as a tribal people. Islam and other immigrant religions have no official recognition in Denmark. Denmark does not really want its immigrants to feel at home in our country. “The lack of civil, cultural and social recognition of the immigrants is most likely to contribute to segregation of major parts of this group in Danish society – perhaps causing poverty for many generations among major parts of the immigrant population” (Iversen 2004, 151-152).

3 Various contributions to this discussion are collected in the book edited by Peter Lodberg (2007).
Similar problems can be seen in other European countries. So, for instance Guri Larsen argues that the public care for the nation legitimizes the exclusion of groups that are different from which is considered to be a Norwegian or national fellowship. The reverse of the care in the welfare society is a wall of protection against foreigners (Larsen 2001).

Exclusion can be identified as a fundamental challenge for European societies today, first of all because of the suffering of the victims, but also because it lays bare the inhuman logic of a system that values money over people and thus brings with it the seeds of social breakdown and potentially disastrous political consequences. Churches and other religious and moral authorities have an essential role to play in recalling the equal value of human being (Jacques 1994: 331). We have to ask ethical questions about the finality of an economic system which is designed to exclude a large number of people, calling for creative investigation of new ways of sharing work and income more equitably, combating the “fortress mentality” over against the rest of the world with a new vision of co-responsibility (Jacques 1994: 333).

**Different responses to plurality**

To confront the rising tide of racism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia, firm action is necessary. This includes: information; tolerance (mutual understanding); opposition to racist acts and ethnocentric ideology; and a positive counter-offensive (cf. Jacques 1994: 333). The wider issues are how to handle difference, respond to the “other”, and negotiate plurality. In the modern world two forces threaten genuine pluralism and democratic way of negotiating difference.

On the one hand is the *centripetal* forces of globalization; Theses forces are a threat to local cultures, and the uniqueness of particular lifestyles. The impact of market and media is perceived by the already marginalized masses as excluding more and more people from the benefits of globalization. Further, the centripetal force of market, technology and media has also brought about unprecedented migration from the South to the North, thus increasing diversity in the North, and accentuating consequent conflicts. On the other hand, we witness an ever-increasing struggle for particular cultural, ethnic or religious identities. The *centrifugal* forces of narrow group identities, of blood and belonging, and of primordial ties of language, religion and race seem to fragment societies everywhere.  

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4 Increasingly it appears that many of our “traditional understandings of liberty, equality, democracy and justice may rest on unstated assumptions about the ethnic or cultural make up of the country, assumptions that may be inapplicable in the context of multiethnic or multinational states” (Kymlica 1995: 3; cf. Duraisingh 1996: 42.)
Christopher Duraisingh rightly notes that these twin forces, the centripetal force of globalization and the centrifugal forces of ethnicity, religion and culture, operate in tandem and feed upon each other. Together the twin forces destroy genuine pluralism and democratic way of negotiating differences. The centripetal force destroy authentic difference and local identities by seeking to homogenize diversity, and the centrifugal force has the same effect, but by insisting on the uniqueness and the exclusive right of one’s identity at the expense of the right and identity of others (Duraisingh 2002: 485-486).

In the Bible, however, there is a vision of an alternative response to pluralism. It can be exemplified by Jesus’ table fellowship with those who are pushed to the periphery of society. The table fellowship is at once an affirmation of plural identities and the worth of marginalized persons. We have here an emphasis on human dignity. The Pentecost in Acts 2 in a similar way depicts this vision. Here we have a powerful paradigm for negotiating diversity. The Spirit does not bring about a homogenized, safe and secure uniformity, but a differentiated and costly unity of all people: Jews, Arabs and people from many nations.

A comparison between Genesis 11 and Acts 2 gives two different views on unity and differences. Babel stands for the monological, i.e. the quest for an unlimited growth into heaven. It is a quest propelled by a single worldview, a unitary truth, common technology and a single global language or media. As Duraisingh notes, “The Babelesque desire to have only one story, one truth and one religion, and even to challenge the otherness of God, has manifested itself time and again in the course of our history” (Duraisingh 2002: 488)5

One aspect more should be recognized. Theo Sundermeier (2003) argues, that the splitting up of people into different ethnic groups, language and cultures was punishment for their hubris, but it was also rather “a blessing in disguise”. Although the division led to people against people, it also prevented a single ruler and dictator growing in power. The story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit does not cancel out the variety of language and peoples but rather affirms, indeed reinforces them. In Islam, everyone has to speak Arabic if they want to understand God’s word and speak fittingly to God. By contrast, a multitude of ethnic (and language) groups around Israel is listed in detail in Acts 2 and everyone understands the message in their “native language”. The ethnic pluralism is a source of blessing. The Holy Spirit penetrates the linguistic, cultural and ethnic

5 Pentecost is sometimes seen as a reversal of the experience of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-10). According to the Colombo Statement - which is a statement from a consultation organized by WARC with participation of the LWF and the WCC - this is not quite to the point: “Pentecost is not a reversion to the unity of cultural uniformity; it is an advance towards the harmony of cultural diversity” (Duraisingh 2002: 102).
pluralism. The Holy Spirit does not teach people Aramaic, but opens up their own language to the mystery of God’s coming in Jesus.

No language takes priority over any other, and the social and gender differences are also deprived of their status by the Holy Spirit. Men and women, old and young, slave and free, are all imbued with the Holy Spirit in the same way (cf. Acts 2:17). The differences are not as such removed but no one will now be given priority, and all claims to dominance will lose its justification. Once purified, differences can be put to good use as charisms. The Holy Spirit strengthens creaturely, social and individual pluralism, but in such a way that differences are no longer felt to be divisive and fuelling hostility. Instead, they are brought into a relationship of interdependency that is characterized by hearing, understanding and helping, and that leads to common praise of God. Foreignness can be overcome, understanding becomes possible, familiarity can grow, and commonalities take root. Strangers can become friends (Sundermeier 2003: 567).

A number of passages in Acts may be interpreted as involving a de-centring, a boarder-crossing and a building up of a multivoiced or polyphonic community in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such a decentred approach to the other, in the words of Miroslav Volf, is to “create space in us to receive the other… The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit” (Volf 1996: 51). The vision, then, is a community, a space, in which the “other” is heard on his or her own terms.

In its broadest sense the biblical story moves from the uniform to the pluriform. At its deepest level, Christianity is not an ethnocentric religion and its vision is not one of uniformity. Gentiles need not become Jews, Chinese need not become Italian or Polish. The universalism of the gospel means that in faith one can find solidarity in and through the plurality of nations. Multiplicity, not conformity, is what characterizes Christianity. The vision is one gospel, diverse cultures, one community (Nissen 2002: 42-43).

It is an urgent task to formulate a Christian theology of the faiths. To clarify this task it might be helpful to distinguish between plurality and pluralism. This distinction is suggested by the report *Common Witness within a Religiously Plural Context*: “Pluralism means that not only are there many religions and beliefs but these religions and beliefs are equally true and valid…. Plurality is something all nations have to deal with. It refers to the fact that people of different faiths,
ideologies, cultures and ways of life live alongside each other in the same country and as part of the same nation.” (International Review of Mission 2001: 346) 6

The Christian church – an inclusive community of hospitality

According to the WCC document Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding, the religious plurality challenges us to acknowledge “others” in their difference, to welcome strangers even if their “strangeness” sometimes threatens us, and to seek reconciliation even with those who have declared themselves our enemies (p. 2). Our theological understanding of religious plurality begins with our faith in the one God who created all things, the living God present and active from the beginning. The Bible testifies to God as the God of all nations and peoples, whose love and compassion includes all humankind.

The Christian community is fundamentally an inclusive community marked by hospitality. The concept of hospitality has been emphasized in recent ecumenical documents. To be sure, the theme of “hospitality” has become a hermeneutical key and entry point of reflection and discussion (Religious plurality 2006: 4).

The concept of “ecumenical space” has become crucial, it includes various issues like reconciliation and forgiveness, conversion, common baptism in Christ and the call to offer hospitality. An important biblical passage is Rom 15:7: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”. Christian hospitality involves seeing the “other” not as a threat but as a “gift”. It involves embrace rather than exclusion, and thus challenges notions of boundaries as walls of identity. “Ecumenical space” is also an invitation to the churches to embrace vulnerability, to live a kenotic ecclesiology. Such a space is not “safe” as many aver, but costly. Without embracing the “other” there can be no transformation (Nissen 2005a: 73).

The Bible speaks of hospitality primarily as a radical openness to others based on the affirmation of the dignity of all (Religious plurality 2006: 5). The grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ calls the Christians to an attitude of hospitality in our relation to others. Our hospitality is not limited to those in our own community; the gospel commands us to love even our enemies and to call for blessings upon them (Matth 5:43-48; Rom 12:14). As Christians, therefore, we need to search for the right balance between our identity in Christ and our identity to others in kenotic love that comes out of that very identity (Religious plurality 2006: 4).

6 Common Witness within a Religious Plural Context is the group report of a WCC consultation in Germany, July 2000, shortened by the IRM editor. 346. See also Nissen 2002: 45.
How should Christians respond in light of the generosity and graciousness of God? The WCC document *Religious plurality and Christian self-understanding* (2006: 4) rightly notes that in today’s context the “stranger” includes not only the people unknown to us, the poor and the exploited, but also those who are ethnically, culturally and religiously “others” to us. The word “stranger” in the scriptures does not intend to objectify the “other” but there are people who are indeed “strangers” to us in their culture, religion, race and other kinds of diversities that are part of the human community. The willingness to accept others in their “otherness” is the hallmark of true hospitality.

In Paul’s view the church can be described as a place where we are “welcoming one another to new humanity” (Koenig 1985: 52). The Christian community is a fellowship where the others are accepted in their otherness. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). It is quite possible that Paul in this passage is citing an early baptismal formula (cf. Gal 3:27). As one leaves the old world, a world in which separation and domination are essential, and enters the new, the old hierarchical values based on the differences among people are left behind. The church creates a community where people, no matter of what background, shape, or form, are seen and accepted as equals. In the passage of Gal 3:28 the three pairs point to only three of the greatest separations and sources of inequality in the ancient world, but today it would be legitimate to broaden the perspective and say that the formula implies that all superior-inferior relationships are overcome in the body of Christ.

The divisions that are referred to in Gal 3:28 are of different nature. Unity at the national and cultural level is different from unity at the biological level. And this again is different from what unity implies with respect to the social and economic problems. While social divisions are unacceptable, it is different with national and biological differences. “Not distinctions which enrich fellowship, but divisions which destroy fellowship by leading to hostility and exploitation – these have no more place in Christ” (Jewett 1975: 143; Nissen 2005: 68).

**The gift of the Holy Spirit – seeing the other**

The importance of the others is underlined by a number of other New Testament texts. I shall limit myself to two examples. The first example is the encounter between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18. This story testifies to the role of the Holy Spirit in “seeing” the other. Furthermore, it indicates that mission is a risky endeavour. Its outcome is unpredictable. The mission that started
with an opening of one’ self to a new reality, continues by accepting to be with the other, despite all
differences. The Spirit continues to work in and through us as we meet others and are met by them,
giving and receiving, teaching and being taught, understanding and being understood.\footnote{Nissen 2005a: 65. One might speak of a mutual transformation. Cornelius, the “stranger” becomes an instrument of
Peter’s transformation, even as Peter becomes an instrument of transformation of Cornelius and his household
\textit{(Religious plurality 2006: 5)}.}

The second example is the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). In this
story Jesus challenged the expectations of the Jewish audience by pointing to a Samaritan as an
example. Today, a similar reversal of expectations might occur if we were to combine the notion of
compassion with the notion of a foreigner or another person we dislike. In Western countries an
increasing number of doctors and social workers from other lands are working at hospitals, homes
for elderly etc. Some people are not happy to receive assistance from these “others”. Even outside
the West, clashes in world culture lead to a temptation to raise barriers between communities. How
should the church react to this phenomenon? Does it make sense to speak of “The Good Muslim”,
or “The Good Homosexual”? (Nissen 2005b: 95).

Luke 10 demonstrates that Christian mission is basically \textit{mission as reconciliation} –
\textit{an embracing of the other person}. The image of the Good Samaritan, if internalized as a model,
may lead one to a general perspective from which one sees all humankind as a single family under
God, and it might evoke the specific intention of helping to break down barriers that in fact still

Even though the second example does not mention the Holy Spirit, the point is clear:
the outsiders have an interpretative role. Christian interpretation of Scripture is enriched by the
encounter with the outsiders. In Luke 24:13-35 a stranger (Jesus) enables the Emmaus disciples to
see in a new way. The importance of the outsiders is also underlined in Matth 15:21-28 (the
Canaanite woman) and by Acts 10:1-11:18. The last story emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in
bridging ancient divisions. In a powerful sermon delivered at the mission conference I Port Dickson
(Malaysia) in August 2004 Catherine Ross points to the gift of the Holy Spirit is seeing the “other”.
Our eyes have to be opened to recognize Jesus Christ, just as it was for the first disciples – over the
dinner table, in the garden, on the lake, on the Damascus road. Once, we can see Jesus Christ the
Holy Spirit enables us to see the other person (cf. Nissen 2005a: 74-75).

Catherine Ross continues by asking: Who are we blind to in our contexts, which
prevent us from seeing the other person, and wittingly or unwittingly, mean that we practice a
theology of exclusion rather than of embrace? Might be the Dalit, the untouchable, the street
sweeper whom we have never noticed before, whom we have never seen before, whom we have always passed by in the street and never looked in the eye nor exchanged a greeting with? Might be those migrants who never learn our language, who never even try to integrate, who take over whole streets and suburbs in our cities – have we had them in our homes, offered them hospitality and tried to “see” their culture? Might be those of a different sexual orientation whose lifestyle make us feel uncomfortable – have we sat with them, heard their pain and “seen” them cry?

Church and state
True hospitality, then, is marked by the willingness to accept others in their “otherness”. This, however, might create a conflict between church and state. As mentioned previously, recent developments in the Danish welfare state demonstrate the public care for the fellowship within the nation goes together with an excluding of minority groups (Larsen 2001; Nissen 2007).

The relation between church and state (religion and law) has become a controversial issue within the last decades. Traditionally, it is interpreted in terms of the Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. Recently, Lisbeth Christoffersen (2006: 109) has suggested that the concept of intertwinement might be a helpful interpretative tool seeing religion as neither totally separated from nor fused together with law, but interrelated with it – and not only with law, but also with society and politics. When something is intertwined it is not separated, yet nor is it fused into a common order where nothing can be differentiated anymore. There is the possibility of distinguishing but not of separating the two.

One has to distinguish clearly between Luther himself and later Lutheran tradition (Nissen 2003: 142). In Luther’s argumentation of the doctrine of the two kingdoms the eschatological dimension plays a dominant role. This element has been lost in later generations. Therefore, the doctrine has led to a church-centeredness and a dualism. Now it is argued that God is ruling the world in two ways. There is an important difference between his rule of power in the world and his rule of grace through the gospel.

There is a tendency to consider love as something operating in the individual sphere and to let powers and violence be active in the structures of society. But is this distinction possible? One might ask why the passage on non-violent resistance from the Sermon on the Mount has been referred only to the personal sphere of life, whereas the instruction concerning submission to the state in Romans 13 has been turned into an abstract principle with eternal value. Both texts should be seen in their historical contexts before asking about their meaning for us today.
It is, then obvious that the doctrine of the two Kingdoms has often been interpreted in ways that preclude the church’s critical involvement in social and political issues. By contrast, a prophetic understanding highlights the justice of God who favours the excluded and oppressed. In this regard, the Lutheran tradition has much to learn from other Christian traditions and also from exegetical and hermeneutical studies. – Here I shall limit myself to some hermeneutical considerations. ⁸

Rom 13:1-7 has often been seen as the biblical view on the church-state issue. It is beyond dispute that this passage is the locus classicus of Paul’s view of the state. Unfortunately, it has often been wrenched from its historical and literary context and read as requiring uncritical obedience to the state, no matter how unjust and pernicious the regime.

Paul’s statement in Romans 13 is an example of a strategy of conformity. Similar strategies can be found in other texts, e.g. 1 Tim 2:2 which is about intercession for the emperors. This strategy is based on the idea that the state promotes what is good. The situation of a conflict between demands made by the Roman magistrates and the Christian conscience is not taken into consideration in Rom 13, simply because it had not arisen. A conflict between conformity and non-conformity might arise in other circumstances. In such cases Paul would have been more critical to the state. His basic conviction is similar to the statement in Acts 5:29: “we ought to obey God rather than men”.

Yet, Romans 13 is by no means the only New Testament text relating to the issue of governing authorities. Other texts with more critical perspectives must be added. This includes, for instance, 1 Peter and Revelation.

1 Pet 2:13-17 has many items in common with Romans 13, but its orientation is different. However, the letter is characterized by a balance between loyalty and critical distance. On the one hand the eschatological situation is emphasized. The readers are “aliens” and “exiles” (2:11-12). On the other hand they are exhorted to accept the authority of every human institution. Bruce W. Winter has argued convincingly that a paradigm for the role of Christians in the society, can be found in the exhortation of Jeremiah 29:7: “Seek the welfare of the city” (Winter 1994: 12-23).

Revelation 13 is quite different from Romans 13. In Revelation there is a passionate protest against the totalitarian type of political rule. The Roman state appears to be the slave of

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the biblical texts and their hermeneutical relevance see Nissen 2000.
Satan. But the author does not appeal to revolution in the sense of violence. We have an ethics of sufferings, but unlike 1 Pet 2:13-17 it is not combined with submission to the state. For Revelation is the gospel of hope, at the same time it is the basis of a religious criticism of society and power. The book implies a theology of liberation and a theology of martyrdom. Like the rest of the New Testament God’s justice should be comprehended in the context of the cross.

**Assimilation, critical distance and critical solidarity**

Basically there are three ways of understanding the relationship between church and state (Duchrow 1976):

1. **Assimilation:** all values and structures of the church are assimilated to the structures in society as such.
2. **Alienation:** this is a resistance to the structures of society. In this case the church develops values, acts and symbols which are totally different from society.
3. **Involvement** (or commitment): the church aims at being independent from society; at the same time it attempts to influence society through its witness, belief, acts and structures.

In the 1970’s the Lutheran World Federation carried out a study of the doctrine of the two kingdoms in its member churches. Based on this investigation Ulrich Duchrow has developed six models of use (or abuse) of the doctrine (Duchrow 1977). These models can be seen as specifying the three alternatives.

   The first three models are all variations of the model of assimilation: passive assimilation, active assimilation, and veiled assimilation. These models are characterized as an abuse of the doctrine of the two kingdoms. The biblical basis is Rom 13; however, these interpretations are not supported by a historical analysis of the text.

   The fourth model is that of passive distance. It corresponds to the model of alienation. Here the state is conceived of as demonic, and the church is living as a sect in a ghetto. This model has many similarities with the Book of Revelation.

   The fifth model is termed the model of critical-constructive participation, i.e. the notion of critical solidarity (Duchrow 1977: 277). The sixth model is characterized as the model of critical-active resistance. Duchrow rightly consider these two models as the best uses of the doctrine.
In both models church and state should cooperate in promoting justice – the emphasis on doing what is good in Rom 12:13. If, however, such cooperation is made impossible – because the state has become a totalitarian system, the church has no alternative but resistance. The biblical foundation for this option is Acts 5:29.

Both *formation and malformation* can be the result of the encounter of the churches with the public world. “Instead of being agents of just social transformation, churches too often uncritically conform to unjust social and economic patterns within their cultural and national contexts. The result is moral malformation of the membership of the churches, which inevitably has a similar influence on the wider society” (Best & Robra 1997: 62).

Such malformation was notably the case in South Africa during the Apartheid regime. “The Kairos Document” of 1986 examines three ways of relating to the state. The first two of these are malformations. The first form is called “State Theology” which is defined as “the theological justification of the status quo… It blesses injustice, canonizes the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy” (*Kairos Document* 1986: 17).

The second form is termed “Church Theology”. It does not claim apartheid as God’s will, but its criticism of it is said to be “limited, guarded and cautious”. “…instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically applies them to our situation” (ibid: 25).

The document calls for a third form which is characterized as “Prophetic Theology”. The first task must be “an attempt at social analysis or what Jesus would call “reading the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3)” (*Kairos Document* 1986: 37). In contrast to the “State Theology”, the “Prophetic Theology” insists that “A Church that takes its responsibilities seriously in the circumstances will sometimes have to confront and disobey the State in order to obey God” (ibid.: 50).

**The search for a just society**

In the final part of this paper I want to address two issues. First, how is the relationship between church and state affected by the full recognition of the minorities? This is the socio-ethical question. Second, what does the emphasis on the full recognition of the others mean for Christian mission? This is the missiological question.

Concerning the first issue we must notice that the church and state have a common task in underlying the importance of recognizing each other. This mutual recognition is based on the
human rights and the dignity of all. For the church there is an additional motivation: The grace of God manifested in Christ calls the Christians to an attitude of hospitality that is not limited to those who belong to the same group but extends to loving even the enemies.

Whether we like it or not, the strangers within our gates reflect our societies like mirrors: our treatment of refugees and migrants reveals our values: our collective or individual behaviour towards them show where we stand as far as the fine principles of equality, justice and respect for human rights are concerned, not theoretically, or in some other remote land, but here in our own countries, in our own neighbourhood. Asylum-seekers, threatened with expulsion, migrants, victims of racism, second-generation migrants still not assimilated by our societies – all these are persons, in danger. “When radical right-wingers and confirmed racists make a case of inequality of treatment, minimizing aliens’ rights, does the church speak out to reaffirm the equality before God of all God’s children?” (Jacques 1985: 67).

While the state and its representatives tend to see the world “from above”, the churches are obliged to see it “from below”, that is from the perspective of the victims (Schottroff 1988). This possible clash between two perspectives is particularly evident in the case of refugees and asylum seekers.

The gospel is essentially “stranger-centered”. An inclusive love for the “other”, culturally and otherwise, is at the heart of the biblical faith (Koyama 1993). The presence of aliens provides our societies with a series of challenges. It is a call to solidarity: We claim for ourselves protection and security. Are we ready to offer the same things to the aliens? It is also a call for justice and respect for legal rights. How can states be persuaded to abide by the international instruments they have signed and which oblige them to recognize and safeguard the fundamental human rights of every human being. And it is a challenge to civilization and culture. Will cultures rejoice in diversity rather than lay store by sterile “purity” (Jacques 1985: 67-68).

Christians have an imperative to serve as the voice of the voiceless. Refugees have no voice in the governments of their countries of exile. Thus the church has a special and unique role to play in ensuring that refugee voices are heard (Ferris 1993: xxx). The message from the gospel is clear: strangers, refugees, outcasts are to be treated as brothers and sister. In seeking to live in accordance with this, conflicts with state authorities are at times perhaps inevitable. Governments which limit benefits to one particular group or refuse protection to those fleeing for their lives are not acting in accordance with the values of the kingdom.
In such cases Christians might practice civil disobedience following the example of Jesus. His concern for people in need made him a transgressor of the sabbatical laws. Having cured the man with a withered hand he asked: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to safe life or to kill” (Mark 3:4). For him the most important thing was the law of love. In fact, Paul said something similar: The submission to the state is motivated by the taxation issue (Rom 13:6-7). This leads directly to the following statement: “owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8).

The search for a just society was a central concern for the first Christians (Nissen 1994: 231-232). This goal was achieved in various ways. Some of the “state” texts indicate that the Christians were acting outside their own fellowship – they were “seeking the welfare of the city” (1 Peter). However, in early Christianity, “the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community” (Yoder). In other words, the early Christians aimed at constructing a community which in itself was an example of a just society.

This message contained in the biblical vision of society is a message concerning the individual worth and dignity of all people realized in community with others. More specifically, it is a heritage grounded in the story of a people who are the focus of God’s special care, despite their lowly and despised status in the world – whether they be slaves in Egypt, the poor of Israel, widows, orphans, the sick or the oppressed of society (Villa-Vicencio 1992: 162). The people of God must be a righteous people with a special concern for all those who are lowly and oppressed, for all the “nobodies” of this world, for the “discarded people” (Nissen 1994: 242).

Prophetic theology is always a message of hope and of encouragement for the oppressed. It is a challenge not simply to the forces of oppression and injustice, but also to the church (Forrester 1997: 19). It calls the church to be church, showing in its life the justice, reconciliation and unity that it proclaims and seeks in the world.

**Christian identity and openness to” others”**

The second issue is about Christian mission in relation to those who are recognized as “others”. The starting point for Christian mission must be a vision of mutual hospitality among people of different religious traditions. From the Christian perspective, this has much to do with our ministry of reconciliation. Mission when understood in the light of this mutual recognition has no room for
triumphalism. The concept of recognition, then, is of crucial importance not only for an approach which aims at social acceptance but also for authentic mission.

This brings me to a final question: How can we maintain genuine Christian integrity while at the same time being open to people of other faiths? This question is of great importance in the contemporary debate (Nissen 2002: 47-48). It seems that a similar question is addressed by Paul in his famous statement in 1 Cor 9:19-23 where integrity and openness are held together. Paul’s mission is marked by a great adaptability to men of different cultures and religions. How can Paul be “all things to all men”? Only by finding a point of reference outside himself. The “law of Christ” (9:21) is the law of love that becomes the authority of Paul’s missionary adaptation.

Paul’s reflections in 1 Cor 9 indicate that he as a missionary cannot compel, he can only persuade and appeal; but as a missionary Paul is himself under compulsion, constrained by Jesus’ love, the one unfailing missionary motive of all times (cf. 1 Cor 9:16). Paul does not think of Christian mission either in competitive or humanitarian terms. “He is not pitting one religion against another or making claims of superiority for his own beliefs. He is presenting Christ, for the sole sufficient reason that he deserves to be presented…” (Webster 1962: 71). Authentic mission must be characterized by bold humility. In dialogue “our approach must be respectful and humble. We must not only speak, but also listen, while realizing that we are all on the way to new truths”.

Authentic mission is “mission in Christ’s way”. It can never be understood as imposing the gospel on other people. Mission is not to be imagined as a “conquest” (winning the world for Christ) or a “sale” (selling the gospel) but as light that illuminates in the darkness and as salt that gives flavour.

Amid the missions of other religions, Christians remain committed to a mission of love and service in the Spirit of Christ. The meaning of such mission is certainly not exhausted in dialogue, but just certainly it cannot be lived apart from a dialogical existence. It is no longer acceptable to visualize Christian mission as a kind of spiritual warfare. Such forms of religious violence should be excluded in the light of the very roots of Christian faith. “Maybe we are entering a new phase of mission in which we do not place our own visions and hopes above those of others, but alongside them. We will not exploit the weakness of others and try to conquer them in their

9 Such mutual recognition is at the heart of authentic Christian mission. Openness to the “other” can change the “other” even as it can change us (Religious plurality 2006: 5).

10 For an analysis of the concept of”recognition” see Iversen 2006. It is important to notice that recognition is used differently in different contexts (e.g. ecumenical context; political context, inter-human and missional context): Theodor Jørgensen underlines that neither tolerance nor respect are able to do away with the split up in “we” and “the others”. More is needed, and this “more” is the recognition. Recognition means a basic accept of the other person as person (Jørgensen 2006: 49).
vulnerability. As long as inter-religious relationships (and inter-church relationships!) are tainted by threats or even violence we cannot talk of Christian mission in any meaningful sense” (Ahrens 1998: 68).

References


