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FOUR CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING THE SOCIALLY MARGINAL IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY REFLECTED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

ABSTRACT

The social dynamics of the world of early Christianity is characterised by the limit of upward mobility and social disparity between classes in terms of access to both material resources such as lands and funds and non-material resources such as honour and political power. This phenomenon was endemic throughout the imperial Roman world, which was the immediate sociopolitical context of early Christianity. This article generally focuses on the province of Judea and its vicinities, as well as the first two centuries of the imperial Roman world as the mother womb context of early Christianity reflected in the New Testament. Social minority is not a statistical concept. The most naïve and flawed understanding of social minority has to do with the "quantity" of people. The chief benchmark identifying the social minorities in the world of early Christianity concerns the matter of the "quality" of communal life experience of a given group. This article provides the reader with four defining categorical criteria for identifying the socially marginal in the world of early Christianity: minority markers and social visibility, power deficiency, ascribed minority attributes or stereotypes, and discrimination.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The key determinants of people's social position in imperial Roman society, the sociopolitical matrix of early Christianity, were more sociopolitical and economic than legal. Social minorities in this social context were identifiable people who suffered real and figurative poverty in social esteem, wealth, education, and political rapport (Bonner 1977:105).[1] The social dynamics of the world of early Christianity reflected in the New Testament typifies the Roman imperial world's systematic restriction of upward mobility and social disparity between classes in terms of access to material resources such as lands and funds as well as non-material resources such as honour and political power. In this rigid and prevalent social system of classification and inequality, the rise of social minorities was unpreventable. The early Christian vision of social inclusion, which manifested itself in its familial foundation, perceptively attests to the existence of the socially marginal. The experience of social minorities, non-ruling clusters of individuals, corresponds to the historical reality of sociopolitical, religious, economic, gender, or ethnic discrimination. Our literary evidence lends valuable perspectives to this, in spite of these resources' partial nature, owing to the overriding elite male authorship and the absence of direct testimonies of social minorities themselves.

The imperial Roman world was an advanced agrarian society founded on distinctive ideologies of status differentiation, hierarchy, androcentric patriarchy, dichotomy of honour and shame, and collectivism.[2] This was the society of strata and subordination between each stratum, where distinction and discrimination were viewed as natural ways in which things exist. Consequently, this society was not foreign to the imbalanced relational dynamics among people. Hence, the rhetoric of inequality and subordination is predominant in various literary-historical resources. It is certainly too much to claim that, at the time of early Christianity during the first two centuries AD, social consciousness conceived the socially marginal as distinctive clusters of people. There existed groups of individuals who were accorded the lower status on the social scale and categorical conditions of a non-ruling group or the socially invisible.

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1   Harris (1989:194-196) points out that education itself was a privilege of the wealthy. This circumstance gives a clue to the historical background of Quintilian's statement that the people of his time of the first century CE spend too little time, in general, studying (*Institutio Oratoria* 12.11.18).

2   See Lenski (1984:189-296); Rohrbaugh (1993:383); Malina (2001:81); Oakman (2008:167).

2. COMMON ERRORS IN DEFINING SOCIAL MINORITIES

The identification and categorisation of social minorities could be reasonably different from culture to culture. Furthermore, one may detect the evolution of an idea in terms of defining who are the socially marginal, even within the same society. The modern concept of social minorities refers to religiously, ethnically, or linguistically defined groups of people, whose formation is based on group cognisance that their shared identity and way of life are under the intimidation of the majority (Zirk-Sadowiski 2016:32). Defining the socially marginal in the world of early Christianity requires a much broader concept than that of our times, in order to do justice to the conspicuously manifold existence and characteristic experience of the so-called "others", "have-nots", or "fringe dwellers". According to the sociologist Louis Wirth (1945:347), a minority group is neither a statistical concept nor a synonym for an alien group. A minority group can be any group of people.

The most naïve and erroneous understanding of social "minorities" concerns the "quantity" of people. Although minority groups can mean statistical minorities as the group with the small number and majority groups as the group with the most people, this is not the norm. The chief identifying factor for the socially marginal in the world of early Christianity should definitely not be the numeric proportion of people, but the "quality" of the social experience of specific groups of people.[3] The lives of social minorities were familiar with the dimness rather than the limelight of the centre of society, with some degree of variation depending on their exposé or closeness to the social centre or the origin of influence. The core criterion for the identification of the socially marginal in the collectivistic world of early Christianity is the issue of the "quality" of social life of a given group, not the comparative "quantity" of the group. It is a known fact about the imperial Roman world that those whose overall life quality was in question comprised a mass of people great in number (collective social minority) in comparison to the few privileged members in power (collective social majority) sheltered by the inviolability of social order. Ancient Roman historians such as Alföldy (1986:52-55), Brunt (1987:383), Kloft (1992:203), Stegemann and Stegemann (1999:77) and Toner (2002:50-51) consider that the *honestiores* comprised an extremely small number of a super-elite group, roughly one per cent of the imperial population, and the remainder of the population may have been

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3   Garnsey & Saller (1987:125) and Finley (1999:152) point out that inequality was a fundamentally defining feature of the Ancient World and that the Roman world was that of inequality. Häkkinen's (2016) article, based on Josephus' reports, examines that Galilee at the time of Jesus' movement was undergoing the hardships of socio-economic inequality and poverty.

humble masses who sustained hard lives of physical labour and poverty.[4] While these scholars commonly suggest the absence of a genuine Roman middle class with independent economic resources, Pleket (1971:237-238), Christ (1984:216-220), Perkins (2009:5), Scheidel (2012:1-24), and Scheidel and Friesen (2009:83-85) propose the existence of a middle stratum and reject the rigid *honestiores* and *humiliores* polarity as representative of the socio-economic reality of the imperial Roman world.[5]

Another erroneous view of social minorities is equating them to foreign nationals who either voluntarily took part in or were forcefully merged into a different sociocultural and political framework. A caution is required when applying such a restricted view to comprehend the complex social experience resulting from different social layers of the world of early Christianity. In the latter world, one can observe two types of social minorities, namely "external" and "internal", depending on whether a group originated from within or outside. On the one hand, external social minorities were those who were added from outside to the imperial Roman society through the channels of ethnic migration, military campaigns, and the slavery market economy. Non-nationals, newcomers, war captives, and immigrants from other cultures belonged to external social minorities. They commonly bore the burden of cultural and political assimilation for survival.

On the other hand, internal social minorities were organically grown from within imperial Roman society as the offshoot of restricted social mobility, urban growth marginalising the poor, and the social conventional belief in the legitimacy of hierarchy, based on the natural selection of the powerful or the fittest to rule as glimpsed in Aristotle (*Politica* I.6.4, 4th B.C.; *Physica*

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4   Alföldy (1986:52) asserts that there was no middle class intervening between the super elite and the lower classes, except for some affluent ex-slaves. Toner (2002:50-51) repeats Alföldy's claim regarding the absence of the middle class in imperial Roman society and suggests that 0.6 per cent of the population was rich, 0.4 per cent military, and 99 per cent poor. Likewise, Stegemann & Stegemann (1999:77) proposes that, while the approximate estimation for the elite population of the Roman Empire in the first century falls somewhere between 1 and 5 per cent of the population, the vast majority of people were poor and relied on some kind of patron for their survival.

5   Although Scheidel (2009:83-85; 2012:1-24) proposes that wealth and resources were concentrated in the top 3 to 5 per cent of the total population, while about 6 to 12 per cent secured middle-class incomes, he still points out a very low level of subsistence for the majority of the population. Pleket (1971:237-238) explains that the rigid binary view of Roman society narrowly reflects the perspective of the elite, who habitually described the social ignoble as a "gray uniform mass", a mere foil for the *honestiores*.

II.8.198b29, 4th B.C.).[6] The general social acceptance of the idea of the fittest to rule should have served as an antidote to a latent social discomfort caused by the evident disparity of social privilege and the uneven distribution of both material and immaterial wealth among members of imperial Roman society. From the angle of the rule-of-thumb criterion defining social minorities in terms of the quality of social experience, distinguishing between external and internal social minorities is more or less a technical matter rather than an existential one, since these peoples' lives, regardless of their origins, must have shared the common social experience relevant to the socially marginalised.

3. THE IGNOBLE IN THE SOCIETY OF THE HONOURABLE

No society is free from a hierarchical social order of some kind, since man's innate proclivity towards rising to power, the source of social discipline and conformity, inevitably engenders combative societies that characteristically embrace social disparities between the strong and the weak. Both ancient and modern societies share a similar tendency to classify people and assign them specific social personalities and corresponding behavioural boundaries restricted to their respective social position. The most obvious differences between now and then would be the identification of those who may constitute the categories of social minorities and the degree of difference in terms of social stringency restricting the freedom of social mobility of those discriminated against. The world of early Christianity is not an exception to social inequity.

As Paul stated, few of his audience were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, and not many were of noble birth (1 Cor. 1:26; see Jer. 9:23). Paul's statements to the Corinthian congregation that there are no grounds for them to boast by both human and divine standards (1 Cor. 1:26-31) serve as a key reference for New Testament scholars commenting on the social context of early Christianity.[7] Paul's analysis of the social status of the Corinthians, which is expressed in his adoption of three descriptions, namely "wise", "powerful", and "of noble birth" reflects the staple ingredients for the social status of the social majority at Corinth and the relative deficiency in all three areas, which the counterpart of social majority at Corinth might have

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6   Ross (1995:271-276) expounds that Aristotle's view on natural selection of the powerful is essentially different from Empedocles' natural selection in that Aristotle claimed the existence of teleology in nature. For Aristotle, the fittest who are destined to rule are those who are equipped with virtue, that is, intellectual and moral excellence.

7   Wuellner (1973:666) claims that 1 Corinthians 1:26 is the most important verse of the entire New Testament in shaping opinion and exegetical judgement on the social origins of early Christianity.

experienced. The world to which Paul and his audience belonged produced its own literary and epigraphic evidence of discrimination, phobias, and stereotypes against those who remained close to the bottom of the power scale, the so-called social minorities. As the various literary-historical resources of antiquity confirm, social minorities had to endure social intolerance, bigotry, alienation, unfairness, diminution, and relative economic poverty that lie at the heart of their collective social experience as human beings.

As pervasive comments on honour and shame in Roman literature evidently illustrate, the representative values system of the imperial Roman world was a dualism of honour and shame. This is well reflected in Aristides' *Orationes* (2nd C.E., lix-lx, lxiii-lxxi, xciii-civ) panegyric to Rome when he defines the Romans as *honestiores*, the more cultured, better born, and thereby being apt to rule, while he characterised non-Romans as *humiliores*, the less refined, lesser born, and thus being subjects to Romans. *Honestiores* was a cultural synonym for *dignitas*, and *humiliores* for *indignitas*. In addition, "the ruling" and "the ruled" can be appropriate alternatives for *honestiores* and *humiliores* in the sense that the inferences of both groups are sociopolitical in nature, referring to the respective categorical group of people who share a common trait of either empowerment or deficiency of power (Alföldy 1986:73; Runciman 1989:20-24; Doria 2012:119).

Experts point out that there was no strict dichotomy between the *honestiores* and the *humiliores* in the classical period (Rilinger 1988). This does not mean that social status determined by the possession of wealth, honour, or publicly recognised office was an irrelevant factor before the invention of law (Garnsey 1970:234, 278-280). The imperial Roman world operated on the paradigm of the dichotomy between the noble and the ignoble, as shown in the fact that both private and public Roman laws manifest the symbolic significance of social classification based on the principle of honour and shame. Honour and shame were pivotal and prevalent social core values in the world of early Christianity, as these values shaped and influenced the lives of the people in the ancient Mediterranean world (Pilch & Malina 1993:106-107; Neyery 1994:113-37; Malina 2001:27-30). Various ancient authors' writings testify to the centrality of honour as a core value of the ancient Mediterranean world. These writings demonstrate that, in ancient hierarchical societies, there would be no other way for an author to gain the attention of an audience, in order to persuade them without employing the common denominator of cultural value, honour. The writings of the New Testament and early Christian authors attest to both the early Christian acquaintance with the honour and shame polarity and their avid application of these values in establishing communities of faith.

The language of honour and its equivalents are particularly prevalent in the New Testament.[8]

4. FOUR IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA OF SOCIAL MINORITIES IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

This article employs four criteria that can be helpful to define and categorise social minorities from the pool of those undifferentiated and underrated groups of individuals in the world of early Christianity.

4.1   Minority attributes and social visibility

In the world of early Christianity, social minorities were socially detectable groups of people who were used to being considered as lacking in self-autonomy, freedom, and wholesomeness and thereby customarily associated with attributes of marginality. They were ascribed to minority status, due to their uncompromising minority human qualities such as biological, ethnic, and cultural conditions and traits which they mainly inherited by virtue of belongingness rather than by virtue of choice. For example, members of a respective minority group share the sociocultural alikeness or common physical features that distinguish them from the majority group.[9] Social minorities in the world of early Christianity were identifiable groups of people who were distinguished by irrevocable and fateful elements beyond one's choice such as gender, age, class and ethnic orientations, traditional religious affinity of a given group, structural poverty, or birth defects/disabilities in either body or mind. As various New Testament writings allude to the habitual practice of social distinction of its contemporary world (Acts 10:28; Rom. 2:11, 3:22-24; Gal. 3:28; 1 Tim. 5:21), the most conspicuous distinctions between the male and the female, the free and the unfree, and Romans and non-Romans of the world of early Christianity indicate that the female, the unfree, and non-Romans were customarily perceived as the visible "others" with minority attributes: women, due to their enculturated gender orientation; slaves, due to their status orientation, and non-Romans (in other words, barbarians), due

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8   The following are examples of the usage of honour and glory in the New Testament. Honour: John 4:44; Rom. 2:7, 10; 9:21; 12:10; 1 Cor. 12:23; 1 Thess. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:17; 5:17; 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:20; Heb. 2:7; 3:3; 1 Peter 1:7; 2 Peter 1:17; Rev. 4:9, 11; 5:12; 19:1; 21:26. Glory: John 5:41; 2 Cor. 6:8; Rev. 19:7, and so on. In his writing *Moralia*, IV.266, Plutarch provides Greek equivalents, *doxa* and *timē*, for the Latin term, *honour*, for his Greek readers.

9   Feagin (1984:10) states that a minority group has physical and/or cultural traits which set them apart, and of which the dominant group disapproves and shares a sense of collective identity.

to their ethnic-cultural (including religious, physio-linguistic, or geographical) orientation. Correspondingly, women,[10] slaves,[11] and non-Romans[12] were collectively associated with the stigma of social inferiority. These groups' social inferiority was allegedly justified by their assumed inability to manifest the honour, virtue, and refinement of the free man and their differences from the social norms.

4.2   Comprehensive sociopolitical power deficiency

Barzilai (2003:13-57) provides a helpful definition of non-ruling communities. He does not define non-ruling communities as groups that literally do not rule, but rather as groups that are excluded from resources of political power. In his book *Power: A radical view*, the sociologist Steven Lukes (1974:24-25) once defined the concept of power by saying that "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interest". Later, in his second edition of the same book, Lukes (2005:12) revises his original definition of power, which he considers a mistake, and newly defines power as "a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be, and may never need to be, exercised)". According to Lukes, power and its exercise are the very construction of the interests and aspirations of the dominant group(s). Although the capacity of power in the hands of the dominant can be employed to satisfy and advance others' interests, generally speaking, power is the capacity of the dominant to impede and constrain the choices of others and to coerce them into compliance, in order to make them abide by the interests and aspirations of the dominant.

In contrast to Lukes' definition and model of power, which rely on fixed identities such as social majority and minority, Foucault contests the formula that power is exercised by people or groups of dominance. Instead, Foucault (1998:63) argues that power is not fixed but pervasive, seeing it everywhere as omnipresent at every level of the social body and operating

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10   According to the jurist Ulpian, although all free-born women are considered to be honourable, due to their free status which was the key criterion for ascribed honour, only women who exercise an honourable life are worthy of honour (Justinian *Digest* 50.16.46.1).

11   Bradley (1992:129) notes that ancient slaves, as an indisputable social minority group, left no records of their views of life in slavery. Wiedemann (1987:25) interestingly points out that slaves and women received analogous treatment based on ancient literature that ascribes to both slaves and women the same kinds of vices and shortcomings.

12   It appears that the Romans perceived both physical and cognitive abnormalities as the marks of physical, moral, and spiritual imperfection and limits fitting for the less such as the contemptible non-Romans and slaves. See Evans (1935:43-84); Feagin (1984:10); Armstrong (1985:52-56); Martin (1995:35).

at all levels of social interaction, in all social establishments, by all people. According to Foucault, power is not an agency nor a structure, but it is dispersed in constant flux, arbitration, and conciliation. While Foucault's analysis of power is elusive and much more relevant to the modern concept of power that considers power negotiation as a granted reality, Lukes' model of power, which accepts the existing social order and institutions as pre-determining factors of power dynamics among the members of a given society, seems to do justice to the social context of the imperial Roman world, where the strict social distinction and the sociopolitical power disparity among the members of different backgrounds were irrefutable social phenomena. In this society, the dominant (in other words, social majority) exclusively entertained the capacity of power, while social minorities were persistently subscribed to the position of subordination and left out in the economy of power distribution. Due to their suspected deviation from or insufficiency in what was deemed as socially respectable norms, the social minorities were underrated and thereby forced to bend to the position of cultural and social subordination as a non-ruling class.[13]

Women, slaves, and foreigners (often identified as barbarians) were the disinterested and disenfranchised groups of people, due to their assumed inferiority in their womanish, slavish, virtue-less, and dependent nature. The group differences posed by these social minorities in a collectivistic world such as the imperial Roman world were typically regarded as threats and even anathemas to the mainstream social order, laws, communal values, and cultural patterns established by the social majority. Consequently, the social subjection of the socially marginal was justified by the rationality that these aberrant beings were dangerous to the social order and must be checked and governed. In this way, the imbalance of sociopolitical power, which dictated the relationship between social majority and social minority, became an archetypal social phenomenon of the world of early Christianity, where sociopolitical power and its accompanying privileges run parallel to one's honour. The crucial dimensions of sociopolitical power are that one's employment of sociopolitical power is, in fact, the manifestation of one's social status and that sociopolitical power overrides any other determinants of relationships between the dominant and the subordinate. While, in our modern times, sociopolitical power is often transferrable from one group to another and, therefore, the dynamics between majorities and minorities is subject to change,[14] the transmission of sociopolitical power among different classes

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13   Wirth (1945:347) defines a minority group as "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination".

14   See Williams *et al*. (2002).

remained inflexible and considerably circumscribed in the social context of early Christianity.[15]

The degree of familiarity with sociopolitical power deficiency varied, even among those within various social minorities. Although women collectively shared gender minority status in the world of early Christianity, the closeness of the free elite women to the source of power cannot and should not be compared to the experience of women on much lower strata of social status, let alone female slaves and prostitutes. One of the main reasons why some social minorities became associated with radical powerlessness and destitution was heavily indebted to their poverty in relational resources such as family-kinship ties (Garnsey 1991:51-52). Family-kinship alliance in the world of early Christianity was like a lifeline for its members, especially in times of hardship when the family was called for to provide not only material-based, but also sociopolitical and spiritual supports to its members. Therefore, those who were left to total self-reliance for survival without familial (or patron) supports were the most vulnerable social minorities, since they were devoid of the most rudimentary in-group protection and care necessary for basic subsistence in a collectivistic culture.

The disabled in the imperial Roman world collectively exemplify the socio-economic vulnerability, due to their marginal traits. The deviation from what is normate, that is the ideal body, was far from a trivial matter in ancient context. While the economic outlook of the disabled should not have been utterly bleak, occupational opportunities were not wide-ranging for them. The disabled thus had less chances to establish their lives independently from others' support. Regarded as underachievers by the design of nature, the disabled were assigned to sedentary occupations handling mostly manual trifle works (Plautus, *Aul.* 72-73, 3rd B.C.), the kind of work that was despised by the upper classes. However, these occupations were even available only to a very few.[16]

The serious mobility-impaired individuals in the upper classes were likely supported by their slaves; hence, their disabilities which were complemented did not limit them considerably. Those with the same conditions in the lower classes were devoid of extra aids and faced rejection from most work as being

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15   In the world of early Christianity, honour was the most sought-after value, as it was a core value for social status, distinction and privilege. The acquisition of honour and status was translated as gaining eminence. Rohrbough (2009:112) notes that honour was the limited good, similar to scarce resources such as land, crops, livestock, political clout, and female sexuality.

16   Garland (1995:34) considers that the physically disabled were not involved in a wide range of economic activities and that their economic dependence on family and friends should not be underestimated.

detrimentally unfit. Therefore, it is not an overstatement that the disabled born into the lower classes were mostly employed for labour within the familiar environment rather than in the public domain and were assigned to uncomplicated manual chores such as farming.[17] It was the norm that the disabled should rely on the charity of their families, associates, or even strangers.[18] Otherwise, beggary or being exploited in freak shows must have been the only ways for them to sustain themselves (Seneca, *Contr.* 10.4, 1 B.C.). Sadly, poor mentally impaired people were in a far more debased condition than those with physical disability in that beggary was the only way for the former to survive (Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis*, 4.14.3, 4.14.15, 4th C.E.).

The biblical narratives often depict that the disabled peoples assumed low posture of begging the merciful aids from others. A Jewish man born blind (John 9:1-23), to whom Jesus restored the sight by using mud mixed with saliva, was a beggar known by his neighbours ("Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?," v. 8). The blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52; Matt. 20:29-34; Luke 18:35-43) regained his sight when he persistently called out for mercy from Jesus ("He shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'" v. 48) in the midst of many rebuking him to be silent. A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees. Moved by compassion, Jesus cured the man from leprosy (Mark 1:40-44; Matt. 8:2-4; Luke 5:12-14).

It is not difficult to find biblical instances where the deaf, the mute, and the lame are almost synonymous with the oppressed and the socially isolated to whom God's heart is compassionately exposed. Jesus' explicit command to his disciples to invite "the poor who cannot repay" to the banquet that is exclusively open to "the crippled", "the lame", and "the blind" (Luke 14:12-14, 22). Jesus' invitation in Luke 14 not only reveals his caring heart toward the socially underprivileged people with disabilities, but also resonates multiple biblical passages where the promises of God declare the divine restorative redemption to the remnant Israel, in particular, and to the wider world. In these promises of God for restoring and blessing his people, the disabled are dominantly listed as the prioritised recipients of the fulfilment of those very promises (Ps. 146:5-8; Jer. 31:8; Isa. 35:5-6; Micah 4:6-7; see Luke 4:16-19).

4.3   Involuntary and habitual exposure to stereotypes and name-calling

Universally, the social majority, the dominant group in power, has employed stereotypification (or stigmatisation), in order to control the social minority and to promote their sociopolitical tropes sustaining their hegemony

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17   Laes (2013:136, 140).
18   Atkins & Osborne (2009:5).

over the powerless. In the world of early Christianity, social minorities were passive recipients of collective judgements and disparaging stock attributes associated with shame. Proto-racial prejudices and social stereotypes against specific groups of people were endemic in the social world of early Christianity (Fischler 1994:115-133; Kennedy 1999:299; Connolly 2011:101-119). A specific group's social minority status was confirmed by the fact as to whether they had to suffer low-grade stereotypes underscoring their presumed lowliness for an extensive period of time.

Vulnerable social minorities were often pigeonholed in association with stock stereotypes or stigmas of a disparaging and marginalising nature such as second-class intelligence, being primitive, emotionally childlike, inconsistent, instinctual, weak, lacking in virtuosity, prone to err, immoral, and susceptible to criticism.[19] Both imperial Roman and early Christian literature attest to the fact that stereotypification against specific groups of people was often warranted in association with their occupations for living. Prostitutes, pimps, innkeepers, tax collectors, sailors, and performers were viewed as being disgraceful, because it was believed that their professions prove their serious moral deficiency in the desired appetite for honour. These people with lowbred livelihoods were stigmatised with dishonour, despite the fact that these occupations were customarily accepted as necessary. Consequently, they led a disempowered life marked with shame, disgrace, and humiliation.

In recent years, the field of social psychology has attempted to move away from the view that social prejudices have a detrimental effect on those who receive them (Duckitt 1992:43-65; 2001:253-272). Some social psychologists claim that, in the modern context, stigmatisation is not as psychologically injurious as it was previously thought to be and that the targets of stereotypes are not mere passive victims but exhibit levels of self-esteem which equal or even exceed that of non-stigmatised groups (Crocker & Major 1989:608-630). However, the wealth of evidence drawn from present and past generations corroborates that, historically, stigmatisation has been closely associated with a number of detrimental living conditions such as low social esteem, marginal social status, limited access to education and employment, poor mental and physical health, and poverty.

Stereotypification has been the mechanism of disempowerment through the long history of human societies, young and old. It is a socially tolerated mass psychological manipulation played upon those of inferior origin and

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19 Edwards (1993:190-191) considers that the social elite in the imperial Roman world tended to regard members of the lower class as being naturally indecent and disorderly to the extent that these inferiors were deemed not to be liable to the law, as even law was viewed as not be for them but beyond them.

with assumed aberrant characteristics that are counted as being socially unfitting. Receiving constant social prejudices of a discriminating nature is like living under continuous stress that requires coping strategies (Miller & Major 2000:243-250). The most harmful effect of stereotypification is that, during this process, the members of social minorities might have easily appropriated these stigmas made against them and began to internalise them into their self-perceptions.

The disabled and the poor were susceptible to negative stereotypes. The disabled were, to a large extent, subject to social anonymity, since deviation from the socially conceived normate affected the valuation of persons.[20] The disabled were treated as being aesthetically, functionally, intellectually, and even morally deficient, with few cases of exceptional individuals in spite of their apparent disabilities.[21] Historically, abnormality either in person or in event was considered to be related to the source of evil or pollution (*debiles monstrosique*, Seneca the Younger, *De ira* 1.15.2, 1st C.E.). For example, the mentally ill were exposed to complex reactions, widely ranging from compassion to embarrassment and from fear to avoidance, since they were held as being polluted. Furthermore, there is also evidence in the Gospels that the physically disabled were often regarded as being blemished, impure and unclean (persons afflicted by unclean spirits, Mark 1:26-27; 5:1-20; lepers begging to be made clean, Matt. 8:2; Mark 1:40; Luke 5:12).22 In addition, the Graeco-Roman ritualistic tradition confirms the general social association of bodily disabilities with impurity, in that bodily intactness served as one of the key criteria for the selection of priestly personnel (Seneca the Elder, *Contr.* 4.2, 1st B.C.).[23] In this collectivistic imperial Roman world, to which the development of early Christianity was indebted, exclusion of anomalies was considered important for the maintenance of social stability.[24] Given the fact that the inhabitants of the world of early Christianity were deeply concerned for the salient and aesthetic characteristics of the human body and mind as the manifestations for order and purity, those afflicted with disabilities, functional incapability, and aesthetic detriments must have been regarded as being unfit and thus marginalised.

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20 Avalos (2007).
21 For example, Demosthenes (*De Corona* 67) and Plutarch (*Mor*. 234e, 241e) mentioned persons who served in the military, despite their deformities and disabilities.
22 Rose (1992:36) admits that physical disabilities were generally viewed as blemishes.
23 Garland (1995:63) states that, as the beauty of the Roman gods was viewed to be flawless, it is only understandable that the Romans thought that the victims who were offered in sacrifice had to be perfect and without blemishes.
24 Neyrey (1988:72-82).

4.4   Collective burdens of subordination
       and discrimination

Since sociopolitical power is the main determinant of relationships between the dominant and the subordinate and the oppressors and the oppressed, the concepts of "minority" and "discrimination" are synonyms for the powerless. As in every culture, social minorities were the objects of collective discrimination in the world of early Christianity. These marginalised experienced a very personal level of discriminatory behaviours, including derision, disdain, and exclusion based on the distinction of birth, gender, race, class, possession, or a combination thereof. As discrimination was the key feature of the social minorities' group experience, it was accompanied by broad levels of isolation in the areas of social politics, laws, economy, and choice of profession. While discrimination can vary in terms of its rigorousness from one society to the other, two types of discrimination examined in human cultures emerge in general: structural (institutional or formal) and interpersonal discrimination (Hebl & Foster 2002:815-825; King & Ahmad 2010:881-906).

Wholesale structural discrimination is observed in the pre-democratic society, where the strict social distinction of gender, race, and/or class dictates social policies and relations (Rouland 1991:224). In fact, cases of partial structural discrimination are also found in modern societies, where some discriminatory mistreatment either by the society or by specific institutions negatively impacts on collective individuals. As a derivate of structural discrimination, interpersonal discrimination refers to the application of structural discrimination to the personal level of social interaction. Interpersonal discrimination is the extension of structural discrimination in that individuals with minority status suffer uneven relational dynamics within a group adopting the social biases against these social minorities.

In the world of early Christianity, social minorities were not only reduced to a subordinate position on the social scale of hierarchy, but also shared common burdens of both structural and interpersonal discrimination and inaccessibility to the constituents of social power such as education, social connection, public offices, and property ownership. It is certainly too much to claim either that there was an established social consciousness, which conceived the socially marginal as distinctive clusters of people, or that a strongly shared sense of solidarity or in-group consciousness brought these marginalised together at the time of early Christianity. For instance, in the ancient world, the mentally disabled did not form a community for sequestered living, as no record of any social history confirms. Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that the groups of people associated with categorically dependent and subordinate conditions were accorded to the lower social statuses and the treatment of a segregating nature that the laws even seemed to sanction.

The imperial Roman world, the immediate sociopolitical context of early Christianity, was noticeably inactive in producing countermeasures to the pervasive structural and interpersonal discriminations against the socially marginalised. As the Roman criminal laws exemplify, Roman society utilised discrimination according to *persona*. Despite the fact that Roman legal judgments were reached based on various factors involved in a case such as motive, number, place, time, quality, outcome related to a criminal incident (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* III.6.26, 1st C.E.; Claudius Saturninus, *De poenis.* 48.19.16.1, 2nd C.E.), the factor, *personae*, in other words, "who committed the crime" (perpetrator) and "who suffered it" (victim) and their social ranks were the most important criteria in determining differential penalty during a trial (Codex Theodosianus 9.29.2, 5th C.E.; D. 48.9.2; Codex Justinianus 9.39.1.1, 6th C.E.). As a result, slaves and freemen were penalised unequally for the identical offence committed. Instead, a man of lower social class was not only dismissed as an unreliable witness but, if he was found guilty, he was also punished more severely than a man of the upper social class who had broken the law in the same way.

5. CONCLUSION

The term "social minority group" refers to a category of people differentiated from the social majority. In the social sciences, while social majority refers to those who hold the majority of positions of social power indebted to their monopoly in social relations and resources, social minority signifies the groups of people who hold fewer or no positions of social power, since their access to the sociopolitical, commercial, and legal centre of society is institutionally and culturally limited. In the world of early Christianity, the social majority was in the position of power, enabling them to take an active role in instituting overriding social norms and values to which every life should have subscribed. The communal experience of social minorities was antithetical to that of social majority in that they were marked by undervalued minority attributes, accustomed to comprehensive sociopolitical power deficiency, involuntarily given to habitual exposure to stereotypes and name-callings, and collectively burdened with subordination and discrimination. The facts that, in the world of early Christianity, social minorities were risen both internally and externally as well as that social minorities of this generation outnumbered the social majority, would correct the popular misidentification of social minority either with immigrants from other cultures or with a statistical minority.

There are no minorities as such because they are defined only structurally. In other words, social minorities are the by-product of the imbalance of power and law of a given society. Given the fact that the imperial Roman world, the sociopolitical matrix of early Christianity, was heavily entrenched

with and operated by the norms of androcentric hierarchy, collectivism, and combative pre-industrial agrarian economy, it is indisputable to recognise the emergence of a large number of the socially marginal and their marginalised life experience. One of the practical outcomes of this research, in addition to outlining four criteria defining social minorities, is to provide a working definition of social minorities in the world of early Christianity as the socially identifiable groups of people with suspected substandard attributes in terms of the alleged inferior orientation of gender, ethnicity, and social status. Not by their choice but by their fateful social belongingness or circumstance, they were bent to subordination as they were assessed as being aberrant from and even dangerous to the social norms established by the social majority, that is equivalent to the power-holder. Social minorities suffered socio-political and legal status inequity and endured a pigeonholed existence under the conventionally persistent stigmatization and collective discrimination.

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