

**A Minor Disturbance?**  
***Laws on Religion and Minority Rights in the Nordic Region, 1914-2014***

My principal subproject under the ProNoLa research project examines the creation of secular law to regulate the internal and external aspects of religious minority communities in the Nordic region,<sup>1</sup> with a particular emphasis on how these legal acts interrelated with the erstwhile minority policies of each of the Nordic countries. It asks which kinds of religion were promoted, and which ones were excluded, looking in particular at the role of Lutheran majority churches and the increasing influence of international law in the adjustments of this area of law in the Nordic region over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Background:*

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all the Nordic countries created multiple legal frameworks for the regulation of individual and collective religious practice. As membership and participation in the formerly dominant Lutheran churches dwindled across the region, legislators saw the need to systematize legislation regulating the rights and duties of dissenters and freethinkers. In this process, government-appointed commissions sought both to map and to rewrite the religious landscape beyond the majority churches, identifying the contours of an unregulated religious field while also trying to pin down which features of this field should be eligible for support and nurturing and which features should be repressed and prohibited.

Legislation on religious minorities was not created in a vacuum, but connected in different ways to the ethnic minority policies of Nordic states, dedicated to the handling of differently constituted minority groups, including but not limited to the Sami, Kven, Finn, Traveller, Roma, German and Greenlander communities, to name only some of the major minorities of the region. The general tenor in the policies created by Nordic countries to deal with these minorities was to assimilate them into the general population, particularly in terms of a systematic eradication of their languages and cultural features. In these assimilationist policies, which lasted until the late 1970s and early 1980s, representatives of the Lutheran majority churches played active and influential roles.

Common to the legal frameworks on religious minority communities and the policies to assimilate minority communities into the national mainstream was a shared ambition to foster citizen-subjects that could contribute to national cohesion and civilizational development: in their efforts to regulate and assimilate the different features of minority communities, legislators consistently sought to eradicate the “minority problem” by selectively fostering features that corresponded with the requirements of civic participation in the emerging modern states in the Nordic region. In this process, legislators were forced to strike a balance between political expediency, the influence of an incipient international law on the rights of minorities, public opinion on the rightful place of minorities in the body politic and input from the still dominant representatives of the Lutheran majority churches.

*Data and Research questions*

The subproject will explore preparatory legislative work, government commission reports, parliamentary debates, jurisprudence and public debate, with a particular emphasis on the participation of representatives from the Lutheran majority churches, asking:

R1: *What notions of religion informed the creation of regulative frameworks on minority religious communities in the Nordic region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

And:

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<sup>1</sup> The exact determination of «the Nordic region» for project purposes cannot be finally delimited until a potential workaround for the language barriers represented by working with Icelandic and Finnish primary sources is identified.

*R2: What was the role of the different religions of the majority and the minorities in the assimilationist policies targeting ethnic minority groups in the Nordic region in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

And, building on the findings under R1 and R2:

*R3: In which ways did notions of religion in the regulative frameworks on minority religious communities and the notions of religion in the assimilationist policies targeting ethnic minority groups in the Nordic region interact over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

Throughout the project, the interactions between discourses on religious and ethnic minorities will be subject to specific attention, seeking out possible “spillover” effects between different, but largely parallel legislative processes. In particular, the project will assess the role of regional and international human rights law, which developed a sophisticated machinery for the protection of religious and minority rights in the post-World War 2 era, significantly influencing the creation of domestic legislation. Another important common feature that served to bridge these discourses was the active participation of representatives of the Lutheran majority churches, both through their theological writings and through their personal participation in government commissions, parliamentary debates and public debates.

*Output:*

Questions R1 and R2 will become subject to peer-reviewed research articles in international journals, while question R3 will be explored in a book chapter in the anthology following the final ProNoLa workshop in Helsinki, 2018.