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The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities

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2020

document version

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citation for published version (APA)

Petri, D. P. (2020). *The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

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9. Summary

The starting point for this dissertation was the empirical observation that a number of characteristic aspects of religious persecution in Latin America are insufficiently recognized by existing theoretical frameworks and data collection tools. Indeed, the literature on freedom of religion and religious persecution tends to make four general assumptions. First, it tends to consider that religious persecution emanates from the state, or from the religious majority, and always has a religious motive. Second, it implicitly considers that religious persecution is experienced by groups, based on ascriptive identities and regardless of behavior. Third, it assumes that religious persecution is experienced equally everywhere within a state. Finally, religious persecution is often believed to be equivalent to, and typically correlates with, ethnic or linguistic discrimination or persecution.

As I point out in chapter 1, these assumptions leave many forms of what I call ‘vulnerability of religious minorities’ unobserved, a term I prefer over the concept of ‘persecution’ because the latter is subject to an inflationary use and carries numerous implicit assumptions. Adopting a human security perspective, in this dissertation I show that threats to religious freedom a) can also emanate from non-state actors, and can also be targeted at people belonging to the religious majority; b) may differ based on individual behavior (actively practicing believers whose behavior threatens the powers that be, are likely to be more at risk in human security contexts); c) can vary within a state or sometimes occur only at the local level; and d) have a specificity that cannot be reduced to other identity markers.

In chapter 2, following an interdisciplinary perspective, I discuss the contributions of literature, including conflict theory, for the understanding of the vulnerability and resilience of religious minorities. I conclude these interpretative models offer valuable pieces to the puzzle of the vulnerability of religious minorities, but also have their limitations and can clog an open-ended observation. Specifically, I argue that there is a knowledge gap concerning the consequences of religious behavior (behavior inspired by religious convictions). I also examine how religion can provide a resilience that helps religious minorities deal with human security threats directed at them.

In chapter 3, I critically look at the main ‘religious freedom assessment tools’, which are the most common frameworks to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities. I find that these tools, however valuable, insufficiently detect essential forms of the vulnerability of religious minorities that are related to religious behavior, non-state actors and the subnational level. Moreover, they tend to consider only a small part of the multiple dimensions of religious freedom. I then justify why the human security perspective provides a more comprehensive framework (or lens) to observe the vulnerability of religious minorities thanks to its shift away from the state as the referent of security, its focus on the subjects of security (the victims) and its open-ended outlook. To operationalize the human security paradigm for the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities, I propose to adapt the methodology of vulnerability assessments. In line with an understanding of religious freedom as a multidimensional phenomenon, I also chose to interpret human security threats as any restriction on religious expression in any sphere of society (family, church, social, business, cultural and government spheres).

Chapter 4 entails the core result of my reflection on the vulnerability of religious minorities. Here I develop a methodology that allows to observe how different forms of religious behavior can lead actors such as states, indigenous leaders and organized crime to restrict the religious

freedom of a religious minority, which I call the ‘religious minority vulnerability assessment tool’ (RM-VAT). Concretely, this tool allows me to do three things: (1) observe human security threats that are faced by religious minorities in different spheres of society and in relation to their type of religious behavior, (2) determine the degree of specificity of these threats, and (3) describe the resilience (or lack thereof) of the religious minorities. The aim of the threat assessment is to allow for an open-ended observation of human security threats, instead of following a pre-defined questionnaire; the aim of the specificity assessment is to determine how specific these forms of discrimination are to religious groups and behaviors; the aim of the resilience assessment is to do justice to the agency of religious minorities and to observe the coping mechanisms religious minorities use or could use to defend themselves against human security threats.

In chapters 5, 6 and 7, I illustrate my argument with three Latin American case studies, based on original fieldwork: (1) the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, Mexico, (2) the vulnerability of cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the *resguardos indígenas* [*indigenous reserves*] of the southwestern highlands of Colombia and (3) the vulnerability of Christians in Cuba. Although my three case studies focus on Latin American cases and on Christians, their diversity in terms of institutional contexts and types of religious behavior suggests the potential for broader applications of the RM-VAT. As I conclude in chapter 8, the methodology I developed is instrumental to ‘cast the net wider’ than existing frameworks and tools, thanks to the inclusion of behavioral aspects of religion and the approach in terms of spheres of society, and to consider all pertinent threats, including threats that have a lower degree of specificity.

The case studies served not only to test and validate the RM-VAT and its underlying conceptual assumptions; they also yielded interesting new empirical findings that can be generalized to other cases. These findings include the regulation of religion by organized crime when it takes over essential prerogatives of the state, the restrictions on religious freedom as a result of unbalanced rights in indigenous communities, the consequences of the internalization of a restrictive definition of religious freedom by religious minorities themselves in authoritarian contexts, and the crosscutting finding that vulnerability increases when the religious minority constitutes an ideological alternative to the powers that be. In chapter 8 I further develop a reflection on the implications of the main findings of my research for religious minorities, faith-based organizations and human rights agencies. Among other things, I stress the importance of raising awareness about human security threats that are faced by religious minorities, the need to develop and facilitate reflections about coping mechanisms and the central importance of social wisdom.

The RM-VAT constitutes a valuable instrument to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities in ways and on levels not observed before. These new insights form a useful basis to reflect on and develop methods to build resilience within these groups and raise awareness of their situation worldwide.