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1. Introduction

In April 2018, I had the opportunity to visit the museum devoted to Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Salvadoran prelate who was murdered on 24 March 1980 while offering Mass. It is widely accepted that he was killed by a right-wing death squad for his public denunciation of social injustice and human rights violations. Romero was declared a martyr by the Vatican in 2015 (and canonized in 2018), but this almost did not happen. My guide told me that the canonization process was stalled for ideological reasons due to his presumed adherence to liberation theology. Moreover, because he was killed for political reasons, Vatican theologians argued for a long time whether he qualified as a martyr. Eventually, they agreed he was indeed a martyr, reaching the compromise that he was killed *in odium fidei* (“in hatred of the faith”).

The debate about martyrdom and canonization is an internal matter of the Vatican, but it reflects a broader misunderstanding of the vulnerability of religious engagement both within and outside academia. No one would disagree that social and political activism of religious people can be risky and even life threatening in authoritarian contexts. However, risks related to religious engagement are rarely understood as violations of religious freedom, nor are they recognized as a consequence of behavior inspired by religious convictions. Often, the religious dimension is readily discarded at the expense of alternative explanations. Studies that focus expressly on religious persecution tend to overlook its behavioral dimension.

Yet, religious minorities are vulnerable in more ways than is commonly accepted, at least that is the core message of this thesis. In this introduction, I first describe the initial observations that constitute the background of my research (1.1). Based on these initial observations, I give a justification for studying the vulnerability of religious minorities (1.2), discuss the aim of this research (1.3) and introduce my research questions (1.4). I then offer some definitions of key concepts (1.5), introduce my case studies (1.6) and present a reading guide for this dissertation (1.7).

1.1 Initial observations

While working as a development consultant in Latin America, I came across many cases in which the human rights of religious groups were violated. Because these cases were so atypical at various levels, I struggled to properly understand and situate them with the social science tools I had at my disposal. The cases were atypical because they were more related to religious behavior than to religious identity, had little to do with legislation but rather with its enforcement, involved non-state actors, and seemed to be more prevalent in contexts with human security challenges.

The analytical frameworks that I knew of seemed insufficient to interpret these cases which presented me with a puzzle: How to understand the vulnerability of religious minorities in very different contexts in Latin America? My reflection about these cases led me to formulate seven initial observations for this dissertation about the vulnerability of religious minorities that I briefly discuss in the following. These initial observations constitute the points of departure that triggered this research:

- Religious minorities possess a demonstrable vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses (1.1.1).

- From the perspective of human security, the enforcement of religious freedom poses challenges, especially in subnational areas with weak rule of law and weak state capacity (1.1.2).
- Non-state actors, including ethnic groups and organized crime, can create vulnerability for religious minorities (1.1.3).
- There seems to be a relation between the behavior of religious minorities and their vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses (1.1.4).
- Religion appears to be a factor, among other factors, of the vulnerability of religious minorities (1.1.5).
- Religious minorities possess a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses (1.1.6).
- Religious minorities use or could use mechanisms to cope with human security threats (1.1.7).

1.1.1 Religious minorities possess a demonstrable vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses.

The first time I heard about a serious religious conflict in Latin America was in 2010 during a trip to Bogotá, Colombia, when I met Ana Silvia Secué, an indigenous school teacher belonging to the Nasa ethnic group. She shared about the violence she suffered within her indigenous community after she decided to establish a confessional school and started a lobby organization to advocate for the religious rights of Colombia's indigenous Christians. I was shocked by her testimony, but especially by her explanation that the constitutional provisions for indigenous self-government do not allow the state security forces and judiciary to intervene in internal conflicts in indigenous communities, even when there are severe human rights abuses.

An important realization for me was that Ana Silvia's situation was not an isolated case, but part of a broader picture. I later discovered that similar, although less far-reaching, arrangements exist in other Latin American countries, including Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala and Brazil. I started to gather anecdotal evidence of similar situations in other indigenous communities, both in Colombia and in other Latin American countries, which slowly started to reveal a pattern.

Before long, I encountered cases of human rights abuses of religious minorities outside indigenous communities too. (I define the concept of 'religious minority' later in this chapter.) In 2011, I was commissioned by a charity to submit a research paper about the interface between organized crime and churches in Latin America. Some people in that organization had the intuition that this issue deserved to be explored, and they were right. I found that religious ministers are frequently victims of violent assaults at the hands of organized crime. For example, Mexico had repeatedly been proclaimed as the most dangerous country in the world for priests (Petri 2012). I was not able to determine then whether the violence against religious actors was statistically disproportional, but I started to monitor it and the cases in my personal database started to pile up.

The common narrative is that in contexts of pervasive organized crime, everyone suffers and is at risk, so there is nothing specific about religious minorities. Besides, why would criminal organizations care about religion? However, the anecdotal evidence I had gathered through interviews and by monitoring press reports made me realize that the common narrative might

be wrong and that perhaps religious ministers might be targeted specifically by drug cartels who for some reason feel threatened by them.

Field research I conducted for various civil society organizations in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia revealed there was much more to this intuition than I had initially expected. During a trip to Tamaulipas, Mexico, in 2014, I met Daniel Pérez,¹ a young pastor who had taken the initiative of creating a football team for youngsters to keep them away from the drug cartels. One of the youngsters who signed up for his football team resigned his job as *halcón* [*hawk*], which is how informants and errand boys are called, for the drug cartel *Los Zetas* [*The Z's*] and was killed. Daniel himself started to receive death threats. This is just one of many examples of similar cases I heard of in which social engagement of religious ministers led to violent assaults by drug cartels.

I came across evidence of human rights abuses of religious minorities in Cuba too, but not in the way I expected. On my first trip to the island in 2015, I expected that religious expression would be outlawed by the prevailing communist regime. I was quite surprised to see so many churches openly welcoming visitors and freely worshipping. I discovered that on the surface there appears to be freedom of worship in Cuba, but underneath serious restrictions of religious freedom can be observed. I learned that religious organizations are tolerated, but face many restrictions, particularly when they grow in numbers. There appears to be no true freedom of expression; religious services are monitored, and ministers carefully stay away from political statements about the regime or the human rights situation.

In Cuba, I established contact with Mario Félix Leonart Barroso, a pastor and blogger, who did not shy away from making public declarations about social injustices and the oppressive policies of the communist regime (Leonart Barroso 2017). Other pastors considered him as “imprudent”, but he believed in his “prophetic mission.” He was imprisoned several times, frequently confined to house arrest and finally forced into exile.

So, I had accumulated anecdotal evidence of vulnerable religious minorities in three very different contexts: indigenous areas like in Colombia, territories controlled by organized crime like in parts of Mexico, and authoritarian Cuba. These experiences made me realize that there are serious problems with respect to religious freedom in Latin American countries, but I struggled to understand why they seem to be so misjudged and even ignored. A review of the main religious freedom monitoring instruments of both faith-based organizations and universities (I refer to these as ‘religious freedom assessment tools’ in chapter 3) did not provide the answers I needed. On these instruments, the specific types of human rights violations I observed in Latin American countries only showed up marginally (see annex B). The observations I share in the next sections sketch out some possible explanations for this situation, but one conclusion seems unavoidable: religious minorities have a demonstrable vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses.

1.1.2 From the perspective of human security, the enforcement of religious freedom poses challenges, especially in subnational areas with weak rule of law and weak state capacity.

I started by interrogating the democratization process of Latin America and the role religion has played in it (Gill 1998; Philpott 2004). The majority of Latin American countries have been

¹ Name changed for security reasons.

electoral democracies for about three decades and have made substantial progress in terms of quality of democracy, notwithstanding remaining challenges (O'Donnell 1993; Dabène 1997, 2006, 2007; Petri 2008, 2019; Carrillo-Flórez & Petri 2009). Since Latin America's democratization in the 1980's, the legal protection of religious freedom is guaranteed by international treaties and national Constitutions. Most Latin American countries are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human Rights, which protect freedom of religion. As far as national Constitutions and state interference in religion are concerned, there are no major concerns related to the legal protection of religious freedom. Data from the Religion and State Project (Bar-Ilan University) confirm that apart from some forms of preferential treatment given to Catholics and some registration requirements and limitations on proselytizing, Latin American states have one of the lowest levels of government involvement in religion, with the notable exceptions of Cuba and Mexico.

But what does this mean in practice? And how can this be reconciled with the evidence of religious freedom violations I had collected? It made sense for Cuba, being an authoritarian regime, but what about Mexico and Colombia? What about cases like the ones of Ana Silvia and Daniel?

Despite the generally very positive legislation, I found that enforcement is a much bigger challenge than many analysts believe, particularly at the local level. As Guillermo O'Donnell explains, in many Latin American democracies, the state does not "effectively establish its legality over its territory", leading to the existence of "brown areas", a color code referring to peripheral areas that combine democratic and authoritarian features (1993). Other scholars speak of the existence of enclaves of "subnational authoritarianism" within democratic nation-states (Gibson 2005; Dabène 2008; Giraudy 2010). The existence of subnational areas that are characterized by weak rule of law and weak state capacity has obvious implications for the enforcement of democratic rights, including religious freedom. The indigenous communities in Colombia and the lawless states in north Mexico fit in this category. This is also true for Cuba as a nation.

It seems reasonable to assume that politically unstable environments, with weak political institutions, failing rule of law and serious human security challenges, are fertile environments for the development of religious conflict and create vulnerability for religious minorities. At the very least, this is an explanatory factor of the vulnerability of religious minorities in Latin American countries that is worth considering.

1.1.3 Non-state actors, including ethnic groups and organized crime, can create vulnerability for religious minorities.

The existence of enforcement challenges in 'subnational undemocratic regimes' only provides a partial explanation for the vulnerability of religious minorities. It still does not explain why organized crime seems to target religious ministers and why religious minorities in indigenous communities are threatened.

A review of the broad field of research commonly referred to as 'conflict theory' did not provide the answers I needed. I come back to this in chapter 2. The human security perspective turned out to be a more useful lens to observe human rights abuses of religious minorities, as I discuss in chapter 3. A distinctive feature of the human security perspective is its open-ended

focus. Its starting point is that the referent for security should not be the state but human rights (Glasius 2008). From this perspective, I was able to recognize that non-state actors, including ethnic groups and organized crime in the cases of Ana Silvia and Daniel, can create vulnerability.

Human security does not specifically look at religion, but the book *Religion and Human Security. A Global Perspective* triggered me to explore the relationship between religion and human security, particularly between religiously motivated actions and human security (Wellman & Lombardi 2012:9). In *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations* (2004), Seiple & Hoover also observe that religious freedom should not only be framed as a human rights issue but should also be understood as a security issue.

1.1.4 *There seems to be a relation between the behavior of religious minorities and their vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses.*

The human security perspective was helpful, but I still struggled to understand how religious conflicts could exist in a Christian-majority continent like Latin America. Indeed, when looking at religious demography, Latin America is a continent that, at first sight, is characterized by a large degree of religious homogeneity. It is generally considered to be a Christian continent, with Christianity being the majority religion in all countries. Is it realistic to speak of the presence of religious minorities, let alone vulnerable religious minorities in such a context? And how can religious conflict involving Christians exist in Christian majority countries?

In addition, in recent decades, so-called ‘new religious movements’, such as Pentecostalism, Mormonism, Afro-Brazilian religions, the Catholic Renewal Movement and native spirituality, have experienced rapid growth in many Latin American countries. Literature analyzes the success of these new religious movements as a function of the free market of religious ideas, implying that the extent of religious freedom allowed new religious movements to prosper (Steigenga & Cleary 2007). How can this reality, which seems to indicate widespread religious tolerance, coexist with religious conflicts?

A closer look reveals that the apparent homogeneity of Latin America’s religious landscape, conceals considerable diversity within Christianity, both within Catholicism and among non-Catholic minorities, including the fast-growing Protestant groups (De la Torre Castellanos & Martín 2016). In Mexico alone, there are 3,223 Catholic and 4,393 Protestant denominations (INEGI 2010). This diversity, however, does not imply the necessity of conflict.

A frequently cited hypothesis is that legislation and culture in Latin America are discriminatory toward non-Catholics (Freston 2017). When reviewing the empirical evidence for this hypothesis, however, this does not seem to be the main issue when looking at religious freedom, even though this is systematically alleged by many Protestant groups as being a major threat. There certainly are cases of discrimination against non-Catholic groups, but they rarely lead to severe human security threats and human rights abuses (Kovic 2007). Historically, anticlericalism has primarily targeted Catholicism in Mexico and Colombia, and this is also the case in modern-day Cuba. Moreover, this hypothesis is not applicable to any of the cases I described above. To the contrary, religious conflicts in indigenous communities, violence against religious groups by organized crime, and state repression of religion in communist Cuba, have little to do with intra-Christian conflict and affect both Catholics and non-Catholics.

I discovered that the diversity within Christianity is not only denominational; it is also related to religious practice and behavior (De la Torre Castellanos & Gutiérrez Zúñiga 2007; De la Torre Castellanos & Martín 2016). There is a notable difference between nominal Christians and actively practicing Christians. The majority of Latin America's population is nominally Christian but in most countries in the region less than 50% of all Christians regularly attends church. Beyond church attendance, recent surveys, such as *Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region* by the Pew Research Center (2014) and *Religious Beliefs and Practices in Mexico National Survey* by *Red de Investigadores del Fenómeno Religioso en México, RIFREM [Network of Researchers of the Religious Phenomenon in Mexico]* (2016) point to notable differences within Christianity in terms of religious observance, engagement in missionary activity, engagement in charity work for the poor, engagement in advocacy, the following of certain moral principles, etc. Although Christianity is the majority religion on the continent, actively practicing Christians, depending on how they are defined, are a minority (Compagnon 2008; Pelletier 2017).

Considering the important numerical difference between nominal adherents to Christianity and people engaging in various forms of active religious behavior, I realized that looking only at religious identity to understand religious conflicts can be misleading. The cases I referenced above have one thing in common: the vulnerability of the religious groups seems to be related mainly to their behavior and actions, not to their identity. Ana Silvia was threatened by community leaders, not when she converted to Evangelical Christianity, but when she started a school and a lobby initiative for the recognition of the rights of a minority Christian denomination. The converted halcón in Daniel's football team was killed because the drug cartel did not appreciate his change of priorities. In Cuba, Mario Félix got into trouble because he had openly criticized the government. This made me consider that there could be a relation between religious behavior, or rather, behavior inspired by religious convictions, and vulnerability.

As I explain further down, religion has been a blind spot in social sciences for several reasons. In recent years, however, academic interest in religion is growing. Research is being done, for example, about the role that religious actors play in the promotion of justice (Appleby 2000; Mwaura 2008; Grim 2016; Baumgart-Ochse, Glaab, Smith & Smythe 2017), however, there seems to be almost no research that explores the relation between the social engagement of religious actors and their vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses. Yet, as Atran observes, "devoted actors, who are unconditionally committed to sacred causes and whose personal identities are fused within a unique collective identity, willingly make costly sacrifices." (2016:192), thereby stressing the pertinence of studying this relation.

1.1.5 *Religion appears to be a factor, among other factors, of the vulnerability of religious minorities.*

The nature of the relation between the behavior of religious groups and their vulnerability can raise questions. For example, it is a legitimate question whether religious behavior really is the explanatory factor of vulnerability in the conflicts I mentioned, or whether alternative explanations are more pertinent. After all, there could also be political, economic or social explanations for the vulnerability of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix.

In the case of Ana Silvia, perhaps the persecution she suffered should not be explained by religion, but rather by the fact that her actions went against the will of the indigenous authorities? Maybe the murder of one of the young players in Daniel's football team should not be explained by religion but by the fact that his initiative threatened the interests of the drug cartels? Could the case of Mario Félix be explained, not by religion, but by the fact that his public criticism of the human rights situation threatened the Cuban regime?

Over the years, I have come across many different actors, including staff workers of faith-based organizations, but also journalists and government officials, who have asked such questions. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd even dedicated a whole book (*Beyond Religious Freedom. The New Global Politics of Religion*, 2015) to the problems raised by using the qualifier 'religious' as a singular explanation of violence. (This is not the only argument that is made in Hurd's book. For a critical commentary see Toft, 2016.) With Hurd, many are quick to discard cases as 'not religious persecution', pointing to alternative political, economic or social explanations.² In such comments it is implicitly assumed that an incident should only be labelled as religious persecution if the perpetrators had a deliberate religious motive and that religion is the only, or at least the most important, explanatory factor. An additional implicit assumption is that an incident should only be labelled as 'religious persecution' if it has a sufficient degree of intensity, a notion Marshall rejects (2018).

For both conceptual and empirical reasons, these assumptions have always surprised me. Conflicts that are purely religious are rare. This is true even for conflicts that are described in the Bible. One could argue that the incident of the stoning of Stephen, who is traditionally remembered as the first Christian martyr, was more political than religious. A careful analysis of the report of this incident in the New Testament (Acts 6:8-8:1) shows that he was not killed for religious reasons, but because he had insulted the members of the Sanhedrin and because he represented a movement that threatened their influence (Boyd-MacMillan 2006). The crucifixion of Jesus himself could also be interpreted in political terms: he was sentenced to death because he was a threat to the authority of the Romans. Notwithstanding the obvious political dimension of these incidents, no one would dare to downplay the religious convictions of both its perpetrators and its victims. A multifactorial approach to interpret these incidents that recognizes its political and religious dimensions seems therefore more appropriate.

As Fox rightly observes: "there are few, if any, important political events that are purely motivated by religion. Most are motivated and influenced by complex factors (...)" (2001:54). A case in point is the interpretation of the ongoing sectarian violence in northern Nigeria, a cluttered civil conflict in which isolating the religious element is particularly challenging, as Madueke explains (2018). Another Nigerian scholar, who prefers to remain anonymous for security reasons, argues that this conflict is subject to a "persecution eclipse" which he defines as follows:

"[A] situation whereby [religious] persecution and civil conflict overlap to the extent that the former is in a real or imaginative sense overshadowed or rendered almost invisible by the latter. (...) [Persecution] eclipse is a dangerous set of lenses that: minimises, overlooks or denies the suffering of a victim of persecution; encourages a causal analysis that provides vicarious justifications for the perpetrators' actions; shifts the focus of interrogation from religious

² Simon Polinder, "Religie bestempelen als dé oorzaak van conflict maakt erger", *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 20/05/2010; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Les persécutions antichrétiennes en Afrique, un sujet sensible", *The Conversation*, 22/01/2018.

freedom violations to conflict analysis; and embraces an instrumental view of conflict in which religion assumes an insignificant place in the analysis.” (Anonymous author 2013:1)

In other words, political and economic factors related to ongoing civil unrest often overshadow and obscure the religious dimension of the violence in Nigeria. This example was given to illustrate a more general point: observing – let alone measuring – religion as part of civil conflicts may be complicated by the existence of phenomena like the persecution eclipse. In other cases, religion may overshadow political and economic factors. For example, in a monograph about the Mexican state of Chiapas, Kovic describes how “religion masks political and economic struggles.” (2007:203; see also Toft 2011)

All this suggests that alternative political, economic or social explanations do not invalidate the existence of a relation between religious behavior and vulnerability (Marshall 2018). I believe it is a mistake to want to single out one factor of vulnerability, because conflicts are always multifactorial. In fact, the human security threats I presented as examples do not have a religious motivation that can be singled out, but this does not mean that religion does not play a role. Rather, I believe religion should be viewed as one factor, among other factors, of the vulnerability of religious minorities.

1.1.6 Religious minorities possess a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses.

The examples I gave suggest that religious minorities possess a demonstrable vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses and that religion seems to be one factor among others of the vulnerability of religious minorities. But is it possible to go further and isolate some degree of specificity that is directly relatable to the behavior of religious minorities for their vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses? This is an important question because it provides a justification for delimitating this research to religious minorities, instead of looking at vulnerability as a result of political activism or the position of minority groups in general.

A way to approach this question is to explore what sets the cases of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix apart from other victims of human rights abuses. For example, what if they would not have been Christians, but secular activists? Would they have suffered the same kind of persecution and threats? It is very likely that they would have. There are countless examples of people who are victims of autocratic indigenous leaders, drug cartels and communist party officials that have nothing to do with religious identity or behavior. But does this mean that the religious convictions of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix are irrelevant to explain their vulnerability? Can it be ignored that their actions were inspired by their religious convictions?

Because this topic is in many ways uncharted territory and only limited data is available, I knew that it would be difficult to establish that religious people who display behavior that is viewed as threatening by their environment are more vulnerable than non-religious people who display the same kind of behavior. However, I believed that there had to be something specific about religion to explain vulnerability. For example, the religious roles of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix did give them greater moral influence, and this must have accounted for something to explain their vulnerability.

I became convinced that it is possible to identify some degree of specificity to human security threats that is attributable to religion. With this, I do not imply that religious people are necessarily more vulnerable than non-religious people to suffer human security threats, but religious minorities do possess a specific vulnerability for suffering human rights abuses.

1.1.7 Religious minorities use or could use mechanisms to cope with human security threats.

Another feature I observed in Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix is that they were not just passive victims of human rights abuses, but very proactive in defending themselves against the threats they faced. Ana Silvia actively engaged national media to denounce the treatment of indigenous Christian converts, lobbied Congress to promote legal reforms and established connections with various Colombian NGO's. Daniel tried to organize support from denominational networks and was actively researching methods on how to deal with organized crime. The threats against Mario Félix were never life-threatening because of his strong international connections and his solid knowledge of his legal rights. All three repeatedly told me they found strength in their faith.

These examples show that vulnerable religious minorities can be resilient and can have agency. But I also came across many cases where vulnerable religious minorities were extremely passive and did little to respond to the threats they face. This raised my interest, both from a policy perspective and from an academic perspective: How do (or could) religious minorities respond to human security threats?

1.2 Justification

Elaborating on my initial observations, the justification for this research is provided by the combined societal (1.2.1) and academic relevance (1.2.2) of studying the vulnerability of religious minorities.

1.2.1 Societal relevance

The societal relevance of studying the vulnerability of religious minorities resides in its empirical reality. Although this subject is under-researched as I argued in the initial observations, there is evidence to sustain that the anecdotes of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix are not isolated cases but part of a broader pattern. The case studies included in this research provide ample qualitative empirical evidence of three emblematic Latin American cases, but there is some quantitative evidence that can be pointed to, such as the data collected by the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (see annex C), as well as some narrative reports that mention specific aspects of the vulnerability of religious minorities (more about this in chapters 2 and 3).

Beyond the quantitative impact of the vulnerability of religious minorities, a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the vulnerability of religious minorities is essential to build greater 'literacy' for government officials so that they can act upon human rights violations related to religion (Joustra 2018). It is also a key to informing the operations of civil society organizations whose focus is to attend to the victims of religious persecution, so that they can incorporate responses to aspects of the vulnerability of religious minorities that were hitherto

neglected. In the case of human rights organizations in general, this research can also contribute to increase their religious literacy, because they often fail to recognize the religious element in the behavior of for example human rights, environmental or anti-corruption activists (Marshall, Gilbert & Green 2009). Finally, the outcomes of this research can also be relevant to mitigate the vulnerability of religious minorities themselves, helping them in their awareness about their position and their reflection on coping mechanisms.

This dissertation will hopefully provide useful insights for the international promotion of religious freedom as this is gradually becoming an integral part of the foreign policy of democratic nations. This is particularly relevant for Latin America where religious freedom does not seem to be a policy priority. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a body of the Organization of American States, does not have a rapporteur for religious freedom and does not monitor the issue in any way, in spite of religious freedom being enshrined in the American Convention on Human Rights. Religious freedom is also not a policy priority for most Latin American governments, with the timid exception of Brazil (Freston 2018). Special attention to the specific vulnerability of religious minorities is necessary in all efforts related to state reform and democratization. Finally, it is my hope that this dissertation will constitute an encouragement to human rights organization to include religion in their monitoring efforts.

1.2.2 Academic relevance

The academic relevance of studying the vulnerability of religious minorities is stressed first by the marginal interest in religion in social sciences in general (Wald & Wilcox 2006; Fink 2009), which can be explained by the influence of Marx's reductionist approach to religion, the confinement of religion to church-state matters inspired by classical liberalism, the predominance of secularization theory and the declining levels of personal religiosity of academic staff (Fox 2001, 2013; Wald & Wilcox 2006; Philpott 2009; Dieckhoff & Portier 2017). This finding is shared by numerous authors, who highlight a systematic lack of interest in religion in political science, international relations, human security and conflict studies (Johnston & Sampson 1994; Fox 1999, 2001; Philpott 2009; Grim & Finke 2011; Patterson 2011; Wellman & Lombardi 2012; Philpott & Shah 2017; Baumgart-Ochse, Glaab, Smith & Smythe 2017). Wilson (2017) goes even further by arguing that the epistemological dominance of secularism in both academia and policy constitutes an "ontological injustice", because it leads to the subordination and marginalization of non-secular visions of the world, contradicting secularism's own claims to neutrality and universality.

In recent years, social science has regained an interest in religion, in part due to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the trend of "radical Islamic revivalism" which challenged secularization theory (Philpott 2002; Thomas 2005; Berger 2009; Patterson 2011) but the study of religion in social sciences remains problematic for two reasons that further justify the academic relevance of this research. The first concerns the challenge that is posed by the secularization of academic staff which seems to have led to a certain degree of 'religious illiteracy', i.e. a growing misunderstanding of what religion is and what role it plays in society, including the nature of the relation between religion and politics (and more broadly society), and the practical meaning of the concept of religious freedom (Prothero 2007; Patterson 2011; Dinham & Francis 2015; Smith 2017). In chapter 3 I address the challenge of religious literacy by uncovering the vulnerability that results from religious behavior and by proposing a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of religious freedom based on the observation of the freedom for religious expression in distinct spheres of society.

The second reason concerns the epistemological challenges related to the definition and operationalization of religion. Indeed, religion is a variable that is generally considered to be particularly hard to define (Fox 2001; Philpott 2009; Wellman & Lombardi 2012). These conceptualization challenges are even bigger in the case of “scholars with little exposure to religion”, as Wald & Wilcox put it, especially considering the ever increasing number of religious denominations and the plethora of religious practices (2006:526). Because religion is a variable that is so difficult to conceptualize, it is also hard to measure. As a result, it is often not measured at all or only through relatively crude indicators as Fox (2001) and Wald & Wilcox (2006) argue. The lack of attention given to religion only reinforces this problem, because it “provides a poor basis on which to develop variables” (Fox 2001:58). This has implications for the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities, which is also insufficiently taken into consideration by existing theoretical frameworks.

Although in recent decades there has been a growing interest in religious freedom through the development of religious freedom assessment tools by both activists and scholars, important blind spots remain. For example, it is not surprising that most analyses of religious persecution focus on religious identity because this has been the most important source of persecution of religious groups throughout history (Jenkins 2008). For example, the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust or the sectarian violence during the conflict in former Yugoslavia were evidently related to religious identity (which partially overlapped with socio-cultural and ethnic/racial identity). This is also true for much of the contemporary religious persecution that is reported by the religious freedom monitoring instruments at a global level. My case studies are substantially different because they refer to behavioral aspects of religion as the primary cause of vulnerability.

Most analyses of religious freedom, including religious freedom assessment tools, focus on documenting religious freedom violations, but give little attention to the responses of religious minorities to these violations. As Daniel Philpott & Timothy Shah, who directed the first systematic study on the resilience of Christians to persecution, *Under Caesar's Sword*, comment, “Far less well understood is how Christians respond when their religious freedom has been severely violated.” (2017:2) In response to this concern, I explicitly focus on coping mechanisms.

More generally, I follow Wellman & Lombardi’s invitation to explore the relation between religion and human security who concluded that “the field of religion is ripe for use by scholars who are interested in human security” (2012:11). I discuss extensively the knowledge gap in social sciences regarding the vulnerability of religious minorities in chapters 2 and 3 and propose a new tool to address this in chapter 4. To further mend the limitations of the relative lack of attention for religion in the social sciences, as well the limitations of the conceptual baggage of political science in particular, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, looking for inspiration in other disciplines such as philosophy and theology to understand the concepts of vulnerability and resilience.

1.3 Aim of this research

The initial observations can be synthesized in the following working hypothesis: religious minorities are vulnerable in unique ways to suffer human rights abuses. Based on this hypothesis, I can now formulate the primary aim of my dissertation which is to explore how

the specific vulnerability of religious minorities can be comprehensively observed. Specifically, my ambition is to go further in the observation of a) what makes religious minorities vulnerable – with an emphasis on the role of religious behavior –, b) how the degree of specificity of that vulnerability can be determined and c) what coping mechanisms religious minorities use or could use to defend themselves against human security threats.

This aim is both theoretical and methodological. At a theoretical level, I propose to interrogate academic and activist literature belonging to three relevant fields: conflict theory, religious freedom assessment tools and human security, with the objective of identifying their contributions and shortcomings for the understanding and observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities. Although my background is in political science and comparative politics, I adopt an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from other social sciences, as well as in various degrees from human rights studies, geography, philosophy, sociology of religion, social psychology and theology. I thus contrast the explanatory insights that are offered by various theoretical frameworks with its practical use to make empirical observations.

Based on the insights provided by this exercise, I develop a new tool, the ‘Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool’ (RM-VAT), which corresponds to the methodological dimension of this research. After stressing the pertinence of the human security paradigm to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities, I use this framework to develop a tool to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities that addresses existing limitations in theoretical frameworks and empirical observation tools.

In the empirical part of this research, I follow a case study approach, looking at contemporary cases from Latin America. The case studies thus serve a dual purpose: they are useful to make empirical observations about the vulnerability of religious minorities to suffer human rights abuses; they also allow to test the application and refine the methodological application of the RM-VAT.

1.4 Research questions

Drawing on the above-mentioned elements, the central research question I propose to answer in this thesis is:

- What is the specific vulnerability of religious minorities to suffer human rights abuses?

This central research question invites two sub-questions, one conceptual and one methodological:

- What is the most suitable lens to observe the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?
- How can a tool be developed to comprehensively assess the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?

The empirical objects of this research are expressed through the following sub-questions:

- What is the contemporary specific vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí

(Mexico), cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the *resguardos indígenas* of the southwestern highlands of Colombia and Christians in Cuba?

- How does the empirical reality of Latin America inform the observation of the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?

1.5 Definitions of key concepts

As was stated, this dissertation investigates the vulnerability of religious minorities from a human security perspective. At this stage, it is necessary to define the central concepts of this ambition. These concepts, which I used without defining them in the preceding sections, are religion (1.5.1), religious minority (1.5.2), vulnerability (1.5.3) and specificity (1.5.4).

1.5.1 Religion

There is no consensus about the definition of religion: “Classical associations and meanings of the word ‘religion’ are currently subject to discussion” (NWO 2012). Because religion is a central variable of this research, I chose to adopt a definition of religion that is both meaningful and operational. The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) recommends the adoption of a broad definition of religion which includes “the established forms of religion while at the same time trying to define the new forms of religiosity and spirituality.”

Jonathan Fox’s approach to religion fits with my research. In an article on ethno-religious conflict, he identifies four basic social functions of religion: “(a) religion provides a meaningful framework for understanding the world, (b) religion provides rules and standards of behavior that link individual actions and goals to this meaningful framework, (c) religion links individuals to a greater whole and sometimes provides formal institutions which help to define and organize that whole and (d) religion has the ability to legitimize actions and institutions” (1999:445). In later work, he defines religion as follows:

“Religion seeks to understand the origins and nature of reality using a set of answers that include the supernatural. Religion is also a social phenomenon and institution that influences the behavior of human beings both as individuals and in groups. These influences of behavior manifest themselves through the influences of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs, and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other avenues of influence.” (2013:6)

I have simplified Fox’s definition as follows:

“A belief system that includes a more or less coherent set of beliefs in which reference is made to (a) transcendental being(s), which is seen by its adherents as important for who they are and which influences their individual and collective behavior.”

This definition has the advantage of being broad, as it encompasses old and new forms of religious expression, including life philosophies, and explicitly integrates the behavioral dimension of religion. My definition of religion also avoids associating religion with ethnicity

or any other form of ‘sectarian’ identity. Ethnicity and religion may overlap, and religion can be a defining aspect of identity, but I explicitly want to take religiously inspired behavior into account. An additional practical advantage for the conduct of fieldwork of my definition of religion is that it is based on the self-identification of its followers with a religion (and their resulting behavior in society), instead of having to subjectively determine whether someone is a ‘true’ follower of their religion or not.

The definition of religion I adopted is very close to what is commonly understood by ideology. Indeed, both religion and ideology can be thought of as belief systems that inspire the behavior of their adherents. The main difference between the two is that religion integrates transcendental explanations, as is highlighted in the traditional definitions of religion (Wellman & Lombardi 2012).

My definition of religion is deliberately broader than Grim’s definition as “an organized group that seeks to propagate its views” (2005:16) suggests, because new forms of religiosity are not necessarily organized or limited to classic legal-institutional organizations. Patterson agrees that the role of religion should not be viewed in terms of formal religious structures, but rather through the lens of “lived religion” which he defines as “the concrete, everyday behaviors of religious actors and the sensibilities underlying these behaviors, as well as the dynamic expression of that religion (i.e., doctrines, heritages, texts, practices, and formal ethics) translated into daily life and collective action” (2011:6), following Hall (1997). Likewise, the definition of religion cannot be restricted to a set of religious symbols and rites, and its sociological features, as Turner proposes based on previous work by Émile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz: “religion refers to those processes and institutions that render the social world intelligible, and which bind individuals authoritatively into the social order” (2011:284).

The definitions of religion used by Grim and Turner are not necessarily wrong, but in my view, they insufficiently recognize how religion interacts with and inspires religious behavior, and mainly focus on religion in terms of identification. The importance of the behavioral dimension of religion in the context of human security is explicitly stressed by Wellman & Lombardi who highlight “the common pitfall of overvaluing belief and downplaying practice”:

“Security scholars and policymakers therefore need to bear in mind that in studying the impact of religion on human security, the focus should be twofold: (1) the relationship between religion as a belief system and human security and (2) the relationship between religiously motivated actions and human security.” (2012:9-11)

1.5.2 *Religious minority*

‘Minority’ is a highly contested concept of which different acceptations exist across academic disciplines. A purely statistical view would define a minority as a group that is distinguished from others (for example based on its ethnic characteristics) and less numerous than the more numerous majority. In other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, the notion that a minority is less dominant than or even subordinate to the majority is presupposed, often without regard to its size. The concept of minority can also be a qualifier that is attributed (or self-attributed) to a particular group. I will not go further into this debate here, but will simply assume as a working definition that a minority constitutes:

“A social subdivision of society.”

It would be logical then to define ‘religious minority’ as ‘a religious subdivision of society’, but we can be more precise. In line with the adopted definition of religion, I propose to define ‘religious minority’ as follows:

“A minority group which self-identifies (or is identified) with a particular belief system (religious identity), which influences the individual and collective behavior in society of its members (religious behavior).”

This definition includes two key characteristics: religious identity and religious behavior. The first can simply be defined as “the condition of belonging to a religious group that follows a particular belief system.” In this research I use the criterion of self-identification to determine religious identity for three reasons: to follow how religious affiliation is measured in most population censuses, to avoid using labels that are imposed by others, and to set religious minorities apart from other types of minorities that are defined by non-voluntary characteristics such as ethnicity, language or disability. Although I will not enter into this discussion in this research, I am aware that religious identity is not necessarily the result of self-identification only. Often, people are labeled by others as belonging to a particular religious group or are born into a particular religious group without having made a conscious decision to be part of it. Gurr (1993, 2000) and Horowitz (2000) argue that identity is ordinarily based on a combination of self-identification within a group and the perceptions of non-group members.

The second characteristic of this definition is its behavioral aspect, i.e. the notion that religious convictions lead their adherents to behave in particular ways. This may include participation in religious events and rituals such as baptisms or church attendance, but it also includes any form of behavior that is inspired by religious convictions such as engagement in civil society or politics. In chapter 4 I propose a continuum of religious identity and behavior based on this definition.

The value of this definition is that it allows determining which aspects of religious identity and religious behavior may cause religious minorities to be more or less vulnerable (and more or less resilient) depending on the context they find themselves in. As I explained above, it was not so much their religious identity, but the behavior inspired by their religious convictions that caused Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix to become vulnerable.

Taking the behavioral dimension of religion into consideration in relation to religious discrimination is unusual. Indeed, almost every sociological study about religion, whether about religious conflict or any other aspect related to religion, delimitates religious groups based on the variable of religious affiliation. To be sure, there are studies about religious behavior and religious values (notably the World Values Survey and the Latin American Public Opinion Project), but these studies do not define religious minorities based on behavioral characteristics. The pertinence of defining religious minorities based on behavioral characteristics is provided by my empirical observation in section 1.1.4 that in Latin America there is an essential difference between nominal Christians (the majority) and actively practicing Christians (a numerical minority), and that this difference translates into different degrees of vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses. This point of departure can only be substantiated by focusing the analysis on particular subsets of religious groups defined by behavioral characteristics, like I do in chapter 5 where I study the vulnerability of ‘actively

practicing Christians’ in a selection of northeastern states of Mexico and in chapter 6 where I study the vulnerability of ‘cultural dissidents’ in the Nasa indigenous territories of Colombia.

1.5.3 *Vulnerability*

The central concern of human security is the vulnerability of individuals to security threats, which in legal terms can be referred to as ‘human rights violations’ (when they are perpetrated by the state) or ‘human rights abuses’ (when they are perpetrated by non-state actors). In the framework of this research, the concept of vulnerability can thus very simply be defined in relation to the notion of risk:

“The risk to suffer human rights abuses.”

An application that is close to my study object is the research on the vulnerability of groups to poverty (Chambers 1989; Morduch 1994; Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon 2004; Makoka & Kaplan 2005; Cain 2009) where an explicit analytical difference is made between poverty and vulnerability to poverty. The poor are no doubt vulnerable – poverty enhances vulnerability –, but these analyses focus primarily on the risk of falling into poverty. The concept of vulnerability is thus a forward-looking feature, describing the potential to suffer human rights abuses, whether these abuses occur or not. In other words, vulnerability refers to both latent and manifest human security threats. This is important from a psychological point of view: the threat (fear) of suffering human rights abuses may cause a lot of stress and anxiety, which already is a human rights abuse. It also relates to UNDP’s conceptualization of human security as a combination of “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear.”

In chapter 2 I come back to the philosophical implications of the concept of vulnerability. In chapter 4 I propose that the vulnerability of a religious minority can be assessed by inventorying the threats to which they are vulnerable, distinguishing between threats as a result of religious identity and threats as a result of various forms of behavior inspired by religious conviction.

1.5.4 *Specificity*

Specificity is a comparative notion, referring to:

“A condition that can be more or less particular to an individual or group.”

In relation to a human security threat, specificity refers to the degree to which the vulnerability to this threat is particular to a religious minority. Depending on the threat, different scenarios are possible. It could be that the threat is only applicable to the religious minority, but it could also be that this religious minority shares this vulnerability with other groups.

I consider specificity as a matter of degree, which can be assessed using a sliding scale (in chapter 4 I propose a scale to determine specificity), and not as a binary variable that only allows for two options: specific / not specific. This clarification is important, because it allows to account for the religious component of human security threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable that would otherwise be discarded by virtue of non-religious explanations, as I discussed in the initial observations.

1.6 Case study exploration

In the description of my initial observations, I referred to the testimonies of three individuals I came across in my professional work and which I could not easily interpret with existing analytical tools, such as the specific tools that are designed to assess religious freedom, as well as broader social science frameworks such as conflict theory, literature on democratization, etc. The realization that these analytical tools present methodological and conceptual inadequacies to make sense of the testimonies I collected and more generally to observe the specific nature of the vulnerability of religious minorities, was the point of departure for this research. To contribute to the understanding of these and similar cases and overcome the limitations of the existing frameworks, I adopt a case study approach. In this section I discuss some general considerations regarding the case studies I investigate. I properly discuss my selection criteria in section 4.3. The case studies are the following:

- (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* of the southwestern highlands of Colombia and
- (3) the vulnerability of Christians in Cuba.

These case studies follow directly from my initial observations. Indeed, the testimonies of Ana Silvia in Colombia, Daniel in Mexico and Mario Félix in Cuba do not constitute isolated cases but are representative of the vulnerability of religious minorities in three typical Latin American contexts: indigenous communities, areas affected by organized crime and a state under communist authoritarian rule. In each of these contexts, there are indications, or at minimum anecdotal evidence, that religious minorities are vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses, which are insufficiently recognized by existing frameworks.

All three case studies are about areas or countries in Latin America. Policy-makers and academics have generally considered that in this region, with the exception of Cuba, religious freedom is not an issue of concern. The fact that Latin America is not the most obvious region to explore religious freedom violations, makes it a relevant field of study as it provides an ideal laboratory to observe the vulnerability of religious minorities to human security threats that are to a great extent misjudged or overlooked. Through my case studies I show that there are very real problems in terms of religious freedom in the region. Furthermore, the absence of large-scale interreligious conflicts with identity related persecution in the region makes threats to religious minorities that result from (individual) forms of religious behavior more visible and therefore easier to observe.

The case studies have in common that they focus on Christian groups. This is partly a pragmatic choice related to my personal expertise about Christianity in Latin America which I developed through my professional work for different faith-based organizations and thanks to which I was able to collect extensive empirical material. The case studies I included in this research can thus be considered as 'easy cases' for the application of my new instrument, the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool.

From an empirical perspective studying cases of Christians is pertinent too. Because Christianity is the majority religion in Latin America, it offers a large reservoir of cases to pick

from. The diversity of Christianity in this region, both in terms of denominational structures and in terms of the behavioral characteristics of its followers, must not be underestimated (De la Torre Castellanos & Martín 2016). This is also true for the groups I study in this research that correspond to very different expressions of Christianity and have little in common in terms of their sociological composition, beliefs, religious practice, behavior and the nature of the threats they face.

Although the three case studies all focus on Christian groups, they constitute very different expressions of Christianity. Urban Christians in the industrial cities of Monterrey and Ciudad Victoria (Mexico), indigenous Christians in rural Colombia, and Christians in communist Cuba probably have little similarities among themselves, beyond their adherence to the same faith. In fact, because these groups express and live out their Christian faith in such different ways, they could almost be viewed as members of different religions. The groups I study also largely differ in terms of their worldviews – holistic for the Nasa and western for northeast Mexico and Cuba – and, to use a Marxian term, their degree of “class consciousness” is nearly completely absent in the case of northeast Mexico but present in the other two case studies.

The diversity of Christian groups I study in this research warrants an application of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool to non-Christian groups. As I further elaborate in chapter 4, this tool is designed to study all kinds of religious minorities, not only Christians. It seems probable that non-Christian groups such as active dissident Muslims in Iran or indigenous polytheistic communities in Africa are subject to similar threats, and that my instrument could therefore also be used to observe their vulnerability.

Beyond their commonalities, my case studies correspond to very different political-institutional contexts. The primary justification for this variety is my aim to shed light on an underexplored phenomenon – the vulnerability that results from active religious behavior –, which led me to select cases that offer broad theoretical diversity in terms of vulnerable groups, the degree and nature of active religious behavior, the type of threats and the nature of coping mechanisms they use.

The reason for selecting my specific cases is that they concern three typical contexts in one of their most extreme expressions, which makes relevant dynamics of vulnerability easier to discern. As Yin observes, “the findings of [unusual cases] may reveal insights about normal processes.” (2014:52). The selected subnational area of northeast Mexico is among the most violent and lawless in the region (with evident human security challenges) which provides a unique opportunity to observe the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians – I have stressed the relevance of delimitating this group this way above – to a non-state actor, namely organized crime. The states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and to a lesser extent San Luis Potosí are among the most violent in Latin America, and the Los Zetas insurgency is certainly among the cruelest (IACHR 2015:64). This case study allows me to wrestle with the question of why criminal organizations would be concerned with religious behavior, i.e. to isolate and gauge the religious factor in the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians. In the case study I also investigate the regulation of religion by organized crime when it takes over essential functions of the state.

Of all Latin American countries, Colombia has the most advanced legal provisions for self-government of indigenous reserves, known as *resguardos indígenas*. In this case study I want to understand to what extent this institutional arrangement creates vulnerability for groups, which I refer to as ‘cultural dissidents’, that on religious grounds oppose the authority of the

political leaders of their reserves and reject the indigenous traditions they consider incompatible with their faith. The Nasa are the second largest ethnic group in Colombia, in which a militant Christian political organization, the OPIC, has confronted, through political advocacy and legal procedures, the political leaders on issues such as freedom of confessional education, freedom of worship and conscientious objection. As in the case study on northeast Mexico, in this case study I focus on the vulnerability, as a result of active behavior inspired by religious convictions, to a non-state actor: the indigenous authority.

Cuba is the only remaining communist regime in the region (although several Latin American countries have tried to emulate elements of the Cuban regime), with a track record of repression of human rights, including freedom of religion. The authoritarian Cuban government is remarkably stable but has also evolved. In this case study, I analyze the subtle ways in which the government regulates religion in modern-day Cuba and describe which types of religious behavior create vulnerability. Although Cuba may seem a more classic example of religious freedom violations by the state, there are nevertheless essential features of the vulnerability of Christians that are overlooked by religious freedom assessment tools.

Because of their extreme characteristics, my three case studies can be taken as representative of three typical political-institutional contexts that can also be found outside Latin America. All three case studies are useful to explore my central hypothesis that religious minorities are vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses in unique ways that existing analytical tools fail to register. They also allow me to explore the relation between religious identity and behavior on the one hand and vulnerability on the other, as well as to isolate the specificity of religion in this vulnerability. In all case studies I also look at the resilience of religious minorities.

1.7 Reading guide

Chapters 2 and 3 contain the theoretical framework of this research in which I explore the sub-question ‘What is the most suitable lens to observe the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’ In chapter 2, I review and compare various theoretical and analytical approaches (including political philosophy, conflict theory and human security) for their value in observing the vulnerability of religious minorities. In chapter 3, I specifically look at religious freedom assessment tools, discussing their strengths and shortcomings for the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities. I conclude that whilst these approaches all provide valuable insights, human security offers a fresh perspective that complements the shortcomings of existing frameworks and that can be operationalized to observe features and mechanisms of the vulnerability of religious minorities that other frameworks fail to discern.

Chapter 4 provides the methodological framework for this research. To answer the sub-question ‘How can a tool be developed to comprehensively assess the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’ I operationalize the human security approach by developing the Religious Minority Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT). This tool seeks to overcome the main shortcomings of existing frameworks by adapting the methodology of Vulnerability Assessment Tools (VATs) to observe the vulnerability of religious minorities. Among other things, the RM-VAT is designed to explore the relation between religious identity and religious behavior on the one hand and the vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses on the other, as well as to determine specificity and resilience.

In chapters 5, 6 and 7, I explore the sub-question ‘What is the contemporary specific vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí (Mexico), cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the resguardos indígenas of the southwestern highlands of Colombia and Christians in Cuba?’ In these chapters I apply the RM-VAT developed in chapter 4 to three contemporary cases of vulnerable religious minorities. In chapter 5, I study the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, Mexico. In chapter 6, I study the vulnerability of cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the resguardos indígenas of the southwestern highlands of Colombia. In chapter 7, I study the vulnerability of Christians under the communist regime of Cuba. Methodologically, these case studies serve the purpose of testing the application of the RM-VAT as a means to reveal overlooked forms of vulnerability of religious minorities, in line with the central research question ‘What is the specific vulnerability of religious minorities to suffer human rights abuses?’

In chapter 8, I address the sub-question ‘How does the empirical reality of Latin America inform the observation of the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’ I describe the main empirical evidence collected in the case studies, validate my initial observations, and synthesize my main findings that improve the understanding of the vulnerability of religious minorities. I also critically evaluate the RM-VAT. Finally, I explore possible generalizations of my framework to other fields.