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Petri, D.P.

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4. The Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool

I discussed the conceptual question ‘What is the most suitable lens to observe the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’ in the previous two chapters. I interrogated three groups of frameworks that can be used to observe the vulnerability of religious minorities: theoretical explanations, RFATs and human security. I concluded that all approaches offer valuable insights that complement each other, but that the human security perspective is the most comprehensive and pertinent lens for this research. The methodological question ‘How can a tool be developed to comprehensively assess the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’ is what concerns me now.

Based on the human security perspective, I propose a new tool that is specifically designed to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities: the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT). First, I present the requirements for the development of this new tool, inspired by the review of theoretical and analytical frameworks I performed in the preceding chapters (4.1). Second, I proceed to the construction of this new tool (4.2). I then discuss the selection criteria for my case studies (4.3), followed by some comments on data collection procedures (4.4) and security risks and ethical challenges related to the conduct of my fieldwork (4.5). I finish with some concluding remarks (4.6).

4.1 Requirements of a new tool

The starting point for the development of a new tool is that it should enhance the strengths of the RFAT approach, while at the same time overcome most of its shortcomings. As I argued in the previous chapter, this can be done through the use of the VAT methodology, which must be adapted to observe the position of religious minorities, while integrating relevant elements from other theoretical approaches. The following requirements of an ideal tool to assess the vulnerability of religious minorities can be enumerated. In addition to the practical feasibility of its application in my case studies, the RM-VAT must:

- 1) Be sufficiently open-ended, contextual and forward-looking to comprehensively observe the vulnerability of religious minorities (no laundry list and considering all threats, not only executed threats);
- 2) Take the local scale into account, i.e. have the capacity of observing pertinent dynamics at the subnational level;
- 3) Take non-state actors into consideration;
- 4) Focus on the minority suffering the human rights abuses, so that self-identified religious minorities, even within intra-ethnic contexts, can be considered;
- 5) Adopt a broad definition of religion that accounts for its behavioral dimension;
- 6) Acknowledge the multidimensional nature of religious freedom (religious freedom as a concept that is expressed in different spheres of society).

The human security approach, complemented by the VAT methodology used by Owen, suits a great number of the formulated requirements, or at least approximates them to a large extent, as I discussed in section 3.2. Regarding the first requirement, I do not use any pre-determined sets of indicators (laundry lists) like RFATs do but I try to inductively uncover the most pertinent human security threats to which the selected religious minority is vulnerable. In doing this, I follow the data collection approach Owen adopted in his monograph on human security in Cambodia, but I turn away from existing human security measurement methodologies such

as the Global Environmental Change and Human Security Project (GECHS), the Harvard School of Public Health or Hummel (all cited in Owen 2003) that take a particular laundry list as their starting point. I follow the forward-looking component of vulnerability to poverty from Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon (2004).

The second requirement is directly inspired by Alwang, Siegel & Jorgensen (2001) and Owen (2003) who recommend the observation of vulnerability at the most pertinent geographical level. It follows that the RM-VAT needs to have the flexibility to zoom in to the subnational level that is most relevant for the observation of human security threats. It is also inspired by the literature on subnational undemocratic regimes (O'Donnell 1993; Snyder 2001; Gibson 2005; Dabène 2008; Giraudy 2012).

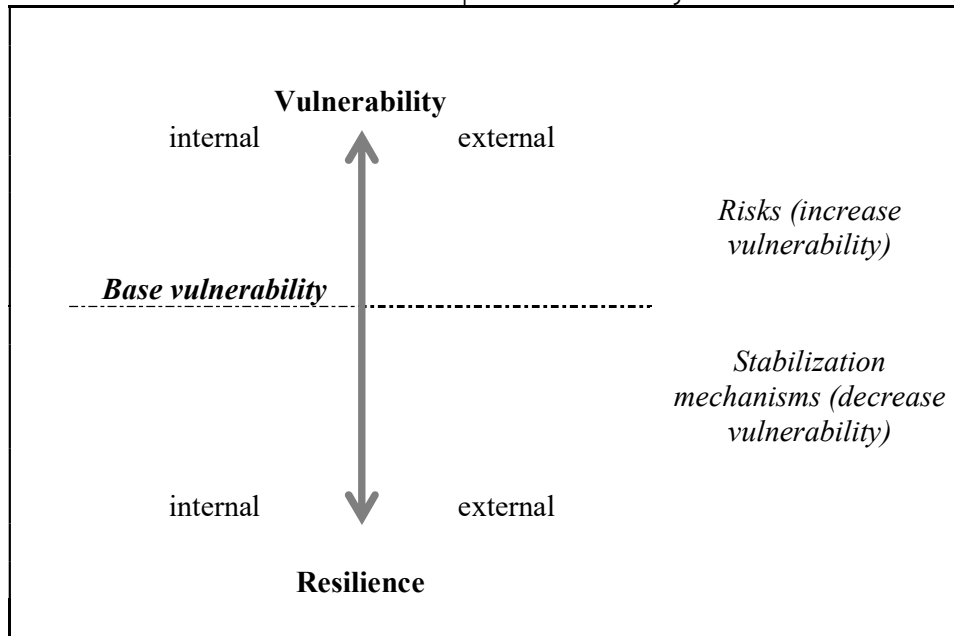
The third and fourth requirements are implicit in human security's "shifting security" feature and the shift towards the subjects of security as described by Glasius (2008). An important difference with Owen and other approaches of human security is that I focus on one specific group rather than on a particular territory. The focus on specific groups is not uncommon among VATs (Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon 2004), but human security has never been applied to religious minorities.

As to requirements five and six, they are dealt with by using the behavioral definition of religion and the multidimensional acceptance of religious freedom as I enunciated in sections 1.5.1 and 3.3 respectively to guide the application of the RM-VAT. This is, of course, where the main difference lies with existing approaches to human security, which do not explicitly focus on religion. In the following sections, I propose concrete handles to operationalize religion and religious freedom in the observation of human security.

The capacity of performing quantitative cross-national comparisons is a feature of the RFAT approach that is sacrificed in the RM-VAT. Because the RM-VAT acknowledges that human security threats are different for each minority and specific to each (local) context, cross-national whole of country rankings become very difficult. A more suitable approach is the multiple case study approach, which according to Yin is useful "to explain some present circumstance" requiring "an extensive and 'in-depth' description of some social phenomenon" (2014:4) which in my case is the vulnerability of religious minorities.

As illustrated by figure 4.1, every religious minority can be assumed to possess a base level of vulnerability which is a function of both internal and external factors. Internal factors include issues such as internal organization, economic base, internal unity, advocacy capacity, leadership or preparedness to external threats. External factors refer to any contextual element outside the religious minority. This 'base vulnerability' can increase through 'risks' and decrease through 'stabilization mechanisms.' The former is equivalent to hazards in human security terminology (and equivalent to escalation factors or crisis triggers in conflict studies), while the latter refers to the resilience of a religious minority, and its capacity to learn to cope with persecution pressures (learning/cultural adaptation).

4.1 The interaction between specific vulnerability and resilience



Source: own elaboration.

This representation of the interaction between vulnerability and resilience has three analytical implications. The first is that religious minorities can be subject (vulnerable) to various human security threats, with different degrees of intensity, which can be documented through empirical observation. The second implication is that these human security threats can be more or less specific to this particular religious minority. Often, religious minorities share forms of vulnerability with the general population or with other groups; in the case studies I try to determine the features that are unique to a particular religious minority. The third implication is that religious minorities can be more or less resilient to these threats, i.e. more or less equipped to cope with these human security threats.

4.2 Construction of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool

In response to the requirements for a new tool sketched out in the previous section, I now proceed with the construction of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT). I divide the construction of the RM-VAT into five methodological steps that structure each case study: (1) description of the context of the case study, (2) description of the data collection procedures that were followed, (3) description of the security risks and ethical challenges related to the conduct of the fieldwork, (4) execution of the assessment phase, which is divided in three parts: the threat assessment, the specificity assessment and the resilience assessment and (5) the critical evaluation of the findings of the RM-VAT.

The context description is an essential element of the RM-VAT for a number of reasons. It provides the necessary background for the correct interpretation of the various sub-assessments that are part of the tool, doing justice to its holistic vocation. It is also where I determine the ‘zoom level’ of the case study, by clearly delimiting its geographical and historical focus as well as the contours of the religious minority that I study.

The second step of the RM-VAT is the data collection process. In each case study I provide a comprehensive description of this process. The third step of the RM-VAT is the description of any noteworthy security risks and ethical challenges that I faced during the realization of the case study. The fourth step, the assessment phase, is composed of three sub-assessments: the threat assessment, the specificity assessment and the resilience assessment. In the threat assessment I categorize the human security threats to which a particular religious minority is vulnerable, based on the data I previously collected. I use the threat assessment as input for the two other assessments. In the specificity assessment I consider the specificity of the threats for the observed religious minority. In the resilience assessment I look at coping mechanisms that are used or could be used to respond to the human security threats by the religious minority.

The final step of the RM-VAT is the evaluation of its findings. In this section, I critically evaluate the application of the RM-VAT, to determine to what extent it succeeded in describing the specific vulnerability of the religious minority and whether it yielded new insights that were not previously known through RFATs or other research. In this evaluation, I describe the contributions and limitations of the RM-VAT as a new tool in relation to the case study.

Here I offer methodological guidelines for the development of the context of the case study (4.2.1), the threat assessment (4.2.2), the specificity assessment (4.2.3) and the resilience assessment (4.2.4). I deal with the data collection procedures and the ethical and security risks later in this chapter. I give a full methodological evaluation of the RM-VAT in section 8.3.

4.2.1 Context of the case study

The first element of this section of the RM-VAT is the characterization of the vulnerable minority, based on the operationalization of the definition of religion I adopted in section 1.5.1:

“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 distinguishes between individual and collective behavior, as religious freedom has both individual and collective dimensions. In my case studies I mainly focus on visible (outward) expressions of religion, which may have varying gradations: religious identity (passive) and religious behavior (semi-active and active), which can be thought of as characteristics of “lived religion” (Hall 1997). Based on this distinction, I developed a continuum of religious identity and behavior, ranging from religious self-identification and participation to missionary activity and civic participation (figure 4.2):

4.2 Continuum of religious identity and behavior

Religious identity	Religious behavior	
<i>Passive</i>	<i>Semi-active</i>	<i>Active</i>
Religious self-identification	Religious participation	Religious lifestyle
		Missionary activity Civic participation

Source: own elaboration.

- **Religious self-identification:** This typically refers to how people self-identify in a population census. Self-identification with a particular religion or belief system does not necessarily imply active religious behavior, but merely describes religious identity.
- **Religious participation:** Following (or not following) specific dress codes or participating in institutionalized religious activities. Examples of this type of religious behavior are church attendance and membership of a religious group. Norris & Inglehart use the variable “Religious Participation” as an indicator of religiosity (2004:41), and measure it through questions about the frequency of attendance to religious services in the World Values Survey. Surveys used by the Pew Research Center, the Latin American Public Opinion Project and the Latinobarómetro include similar questions.
- **Religious lifestyle:** Religious convictions may lead its adherents to adopt a particular lifestyle which may be seen as deviant when they imply some form of rejection of social norms or expected behaviors. For example, religious individuals or groups with values such as honesty may not want to pay bribes. Most surveys focus on measuring religious attitudes (such as on drinking alcohol, abortion or sexuality) or religious commitment (the Pew Research Center, for example, developed a “religious commitment index” which combines measures of importance of religion, attendance at religious services and frequency of prayer) instead of on religious lifestyles. There is no appropriate way of measuring this category in traditional surveys.
- **Missionary activity:** Active religious activity with the aim of making converts (proselytism / evangelism) (sometimes combined with charitable work). (This type of religious behavior only applies to religions that actively seek to make converts.)
- **Civic participation:** Engagement in charitable work or open involvement in civil society or politics as a result of religious convictions.

In line with my initial observations, the underlying assumption of my choice for a behavioral definition of religion is that adhering to a belief system does not (necessarily) make its adherents vulnerable in itself, but that this vulnerability is dependent upon the behavior the belief system inspires upon its adherents. As came forward in my review of theoretical frameworks in chapter 2, when the social behavior of a religious minority – whether simply observing religious traditions, living according to a particular worldview, or becoming active in political advocacy – is considered deviant, it may cause it to become vulnerable. There may also be cases in which the vulnerability of a religious minority can also be caused by its religious identity, regardless of its social or political activism.

The concept of ‘religious minority’ is thus applicable to identify religious groups in broad ways. The continuum of religious identity and behavior presented above makes it possible to identify minorities within religious groups based on their engagement in certain types of

religious behavior that distinguishes them from adherents of the same religion that do not engage in such behavior. For example, as I explained in the introduction of this research, there are important differences in Latin America between nominal Christians and Christians who engage in semi-active religious behavior such as regular church attendance or active religious behavior such as involvement in social work. The vulnerability of each of these groups can be expected to be different, depending on the specificities of each local context.

The characterization of the vulnerable religious minority needs to be plausible, meaning it must reflect a group that is clearly identifiable by a shared set of characteristics (Gurr 1993, 2000; Horowitz 2000). At the same time, the delimitation of the vulnerable religious minority may be unusual (such as ‘actively practicing Christians’ or ‘cultural dissidents’, respectively in chapters 5 and 6), particularly if the characterization concentrates on behavioral aspects that are not present in RFATs or other types of studies. This will only make the analysis of this minority thus defined more relevant, as the application of the RM-VAT is likely to reveal mechanisms of vulnerability of the minority that were not previously known.

In the second part of this section I provide a further description of essential contextual elements of the case study, to give a further sense of the plausibility of the assessment of the vulnerability of the selected religious minority and to better situate the human security threats that I later inventory. As I explain in the next section, the context description is not only a means to set the scene, but also serves to provide an initial assessment of threats. In order to complement RFATs who generally focus on the national level, a subnational focus is likely to provide new insights. In the first two of my three case studies I focus on a subnational area. The context description explains in what ways it is different from the national level and why a focus on this particular subnational area is relevant to observe mechanisms of vulnerability.

In order to take advantage of the existing knowledge about the religious freedom situation in the country of focus, in each case study I also consider the contributions of the most common RFATs, taking into consideration not only socio-metric tools but also pertinent narrative reports. As already stated, the application of the RM-VAT should complement the findings of the RFATs, revealing elements that the RFATs do not consider or providing nuances that apply to the selected vulnerable minority.

4.2.2 Threat assessment

The threat assessment is the most substantial part of the RM-VAT. It basically serves as a way of organizing all facts, analyses, anecdotes and expert opinions that were compiled during the data collection process. In the threat assessment, I first list all human security threats I identified through the consultation of experts and interviewees, regardless of their motive and their specificity. In line with the open-ended character of human security and avoiding the laundry list approach, I aimed at mapping the threats in, as much as possible, a comprehensive way, directly following the reports made by my interviewees themselves. This meant that I do not discard threats on the basis of implicit prepossessed notions such as: ‘this threat cannot be labeled as religious persecution’ or ‘this threat is not specific enough.’

Because of the importance of the self-reporting of the interviewees as a data collection instrument, I tried to encourage them to openly share their experiences, without restricting them by any interpretations made out of a preconceived methodology. Following Owen (2003) and Alkire (2003), the only criterion for a threat to be considered is that it must surpass the threshold

of human security i.e. threatening human dignity. The goal of the threat assessment is precisely to inventory all existent human security threats that are faced by the religious minority.

The obvious way to categorize human security threats is to follow the seven components of human security identified by the UNDP (economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security), as Owen does. Religious minorities can indeed be targeted for all seven types of human security threats listed by UNDP. In the framework of this research, however, it makes more sense to categorize human security threats in relation to religious freedom. The seven components of human security refer to general areas in which human security can be threatened but in this research, I am interested in observing human security threats that result from religious identity and behavior. Following the multidimensional understanding of religious freedom presented in section 3.3, the human security threats can be understood as restrictions on religious expression that can be observed in different spheres of society. Based on this model, six spheres can be distinguished: the family sphere, the church sphere, the social sphere (school and health care), the business sphere (marketplace), the cultural sphere (media, arts and entertainment) and the government sphere. I observe human security threats resulting from religious identity or behavior in each of these spheres.

In line with the open-ended feature of human security, this categorization has the advantage that it broadens the traditional perspective of religious freedom beyond the church sphere (freedom of worship) and beyond issues related to the separation between church and state. It also serves as a handy memory aid to identify human security threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable that are not immediately taken into consideration when talking about religious freedom or religious persecution.

After listing all threats, I categorize them using two variables: the continuum of religious identity and behavior and the spheres of society in which they are manifested. This allows me to interpret the human security threats I observe as ‘restrictions of religious expression within any sphere of society’, in agreement with the multidimensional nature of religious freedom I introduced in section 3.3. Figure 4.3 is the central tool of the threat assessment.

4.3 Tool for the assessment of human security threats by sphere of society

<i>Continuum of religious identity and behavior</i>	<i>Religious identity</i>	<i>Semi-active religious behavior</i>	<i>Active religious behavior</i>
<i>Spheres of society</i>			
Family sphere			
Church sphere			
Social sphere (school and health care)			
Business sphere (marketplace)			
Cultural sphere (media, arts and entertainment)			
Government sphere			

Source: own elaboration.

Once all relevant human security threats have been listed and categorized, I proceed to describe them. As much as possible, I provide a comprehensive overview of the available evidence for each of these threats, contrasting all the data collected through my fieldwork and through secondary sources. If the evidence is very thin or of poor quality, I try to provide an explanation for it. In the description of each threat I include an explanation of the cause of the threats and the actor that is responsible for it. When possible, I say something about the frequency and intensity of the threat.

4.2.3 *Specificity assessment*

After having established the threats to which the observed religious minority is vulnerable in the threat assessment, my aim in the specificity assessment is to determine to what extent the vulnerability is specific to them as religious minority, as distinguished from non-religious minorities. Following the proposition that it is possible to determine empirically the degree of specificity (uniqueness) of the vulnerability of religious minorities, in the specificity assessment I give each identified threat a rank according to its degree of specificity. To operationalize my definition of specificity as “a condition that can be more or less particular to an individual or group.” I use a three-level sliding scale (figure 4.4) to determine the degree of specificity of each individual threat, which I justify in an accompanying narrative.

4.4 Degree of specificity of the vulnerability of the religious minority to identified threats

Degree of specificity	Interpretation
<i>Low (not very specific)</i>	The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including the observed religious minority.
<i>Medium (quite specific)</i>	The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but the observed religious minority in particular.
<i>High (very specific)</i>	The observed religious minority is specifically vulnerable to this threat.

Source: own elaboration.

Using a sliding scale allows to practically differentiate between threats that are only applicable to the observed religious minority and threats it shares with other groups. By doing this, I am able to overcome the implicit binary approach to specificity (specific / not specific) that characterizes most conflict analyses. John McWhorter, a linguist, observes:

“almost anything interesting in life is a continuum phenomenon. Our tendency is to put things in pigeonholes and seek binary oppositions: we exalt Linnaeus and physics while treating “fuzzy logic” as a trendy novelty. Yet, in real life, as often as not, the phenomena we observe on our planet are nondiscrete: clines are everywhere.” (2003).

As I explained in the introduction, binary approaches to specificity are misleading in my opinion, because they lead many human security threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable to be discarded based on the judgment that they are ‘not specifically related to religion.’ This also connects with my initial observation that religion appears to be a factor, among other factors, of the vulnerability of religious minorities.

In an article entitled “Murder in Mexico: are journalists victims of general violence or targeted political violence?” Bartman (2018) confronts a similar problem that is also related to the determination of specificity. In his article, he “undermines the official narrative that there is nothing distinct about violence against journalists, and that it is a mere corollary of crime” by proving that journalists are, in fact, victims of targeted violence (and are even at a higher risk than the general population of being killed) by both organized crime and subnational government officials because of the nature of their work. Although my approach is different from Bartman’s who follows a statistical probabilities method, the use of a sliding scale approximates it. The sliding scale I use is roughly divided into three because the qualitative data I collected does not allow me to be more precise than that.

In order to come to a more nuanced picture than would otherwise have been possible, I apply the sliding scale to determine the degree of specificity of the observed religious minority to individual threats and not to its vulnerability in general. This enables me to distinguish degrees of specificity of each individual threat and to establish the relation between the specificity of the vulnerability to threats and the continuum of religious identity and behavior.

It is important to bear in mind that specificity is not the same thing as severity or intensity. To say that a threat has a low degree of specificity means that it has a low degree of uniqueness for the observed religious minority. It does not imply, however, that this threat has a low intensity. A threat can have a low degree of specificity but be very severe, or inversely, a threat with a high degree of specificity can have a low intensity.

4.2.4 Resilience assessment

After assessing the specific vulnerability of the religious minority through the first two sub-assessments, the resilience assessment describes the main mechanisms that are used or could be used by the religious minority to cope with the human security threats it faces. The use of coping mechanisms does not necessarily reduce the level of threats the religious minority faces but can make it more resilient and thereby diminish its vulnerability. I explicitly distinguish between coping mechanisms that are used and coping mechanisms that could be used because vulnerable religious minorities do not necessarily implement them.

4.5 Categorization of coping mechanisms of religious minorities

Responses to human security threats	Coping mechanisms	Definition
Exit	Avoidance	Avoidance of any interaction with the actors responsible for the human security threats, leading to flight or internal exit in the most extreme case.
	Spiritual endurance	Withdrawal within oneself, seeking comfort in personal religious beliefs.
Caution	Compliance	Obedience to any requirements made by the actors responsible for the human security threats.
	Social wisdom	The ability, based on self-reflection, to anticipate how one's words and actions might be received in order to avoid being perceived as provocative.
Voice	Moral standing	Credibility with people outside the religious minority as a result of the respect religious roles or religious beliefs commands (moral authority).
	Solidarity	Mitigation of the humanitarian impact of human security threats within a religious community.
	Collective action	Engagement in advocacy or any form of (organized) non-violent resistance or protest to the actors responsible for the human security threats.
	Taking up arms	Direct confrontation of armed power through the creation of self-defense militias or counter-insurgency units.

Source: own elaboration drawing elements from Hirschman (1970), Grix (2000), Habermas (2006) and Glasius (2012).

Coping mechanisms can be categorized in many ways. Based on the theoretical material I presented in section 2.3, eight categories of coping mechanisms of religious minorities can be distinguished: 'avoidance', 'spiritual endurance', 'compliance', 'social wisdom', 'moral standing', 'solidarity', 'collective action' and 'taking up arms.' The distinction between these categories is not watertight, as they can overlap, and religious minorities can engage in different strategies at the same time or at different moments, as alternative or complementary strategies.

Albert O. Hirschman's classic threefold categorization of 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty' of "responses to decline in firms, organizations and states" or "recuperation mechanisms" (1970) could be adapted to be used as an ordering principle of these coping mechanisms. In the

framework of this research, I keep the categories of exit and voice, but substitute loyalty, which Hirschman strongly connects with the private or family spheres, by ‘caution’ which is more applicable to human security contexts. Exit covers avoidance strategies, including flight, internal exit (spiritual endurance) and the evasion of any kind of interaction with the powers that be. Compliance is clearly a caution response, referring to behaviors of tacit acceptance of the human security situation and obedience to any requirements made by the powers that be, and so is social wisdom. Moral standing, solidarity, collective action and taking up arms are all distinct types of voice responses. Figure 4.5 synthesizes how I propose to order the coping mechanisms.

4.3 Case study selection

In section 1.6 I gave some general considerations regarding the case studies I included in this research. First, I mentioned that they concern cases of vulnerable religious minorities that are insufficiently recognized by existing frameworks and by policy-makers. Second, they correspond to areas or countries in Latin America, which is an ideal laboratory to observe forms of vulnerability of religious minorities that are to a great extent misjudged or overlooked, particularly when they are related to religious behavior. Third, they focus on Christian groups, which is the majority religion of the region but that presents much diversity in terms of its sociological composition, beliefs, religious practice, behavior and the nature of the threats faced by its adherents. Fourth, the case studies concern three typical contexts in one of their most extreme expressions, which makes relevant dynamics of vulnerability easier to discern. In this section, I give a proper discussion of the selection criteria for the inclusion of these case studies in this research:

- (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.

According to Yin, a case study consists of a detailed description and analysis of social units or unique entities. The rationale for a multiple-case design must derive from the researcher’s “understanding of literal and theoretical replications” of each case study (2014:27-69). In the context of this research this means that each case study must be expected to present a set of outcomes in line with my central proposition that religious minorities are vulnerable in unique ways to suffer human rights abuses.

Beyond the feasibility criterion – in terms of the practical possibility to do fieldwork and to obtain usable information – I selected these case studies based on the “diverse case method” as described by Gerring (Gerring 2008; Gerring 2017). I adopted this particular method because it “has as its primary objective the achievement of maximum variance along relevant dimensions” (Seawright & Gerring 2008:300), which suits my aim to advance in the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities in a variety of contexts, particularly in areas that are insufficiently noticed in existing RFATs, such as the consequences of religious behavior, the role of non-state actors or the distinctiveness of subnational realities.

With this in mind, my three case studies correspond to three “typical sub-types” of political-institutional configurations which roughly correspond to the main challenges to religious

freedom that affect the continent: the regulation of religion by organized crime; the hostility towards Christian converts in indigenous communities and the restrictions on religious expression in communist and post-communist countries (Petri 2015; Freston 2018).

Within each of these typical sub-types, I selected the most extreme contexts: the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas are amongst the most violent in the region; the indigenous communities in Colombia have the most far-reaching degree of indigenous autonomy in Latin America (the Nasa are the second largest indigenous group and there have been frequent political conflicts and legal procedures regarding the degree of respect for religious freedom within the *resguardos*); Cuba is the only authoritarian communist regime in Latin America. The obvious advantage of this choice is that it allows the social phenomenon I focus on to be more easily observed than in less extreme contexts (Yin 2014:52). A downside of this choice is that it reduces the potential for generalization of my findings, a point I will come back to in section 8.3.4. This being said, as Seawright & Gerring argue, “the diverse case method probably has stronger claims to representativeness than any other small-N sample” (2008:301). Because of their diversity, I am confident that my case studies constitute representative illustrations of the vulnerability of religious communities in the continent.

Following the multiple case study approach proposed by Yin, each case study further serves as a means of testing the RM-VAT as a tool, in particular its capacity to identify the main human security threats for which the selected minority is specifically vulnerable, providing a picture of the specific threats and risks the observed religious minority is subjected to. The main contributions of each case study can then be compared, which is, as Tarrow argues, “an intermediate step in theory building” (2010:245), or rather, in the framework of this dissertation, ‘tool building.’

All three cases, however different in terms of their respective political-institutional contexts, correspond to contemporary situations in which a particular religious minority, defined on the basis of its behavioral characteristics, is expected to present a demonstrable and specific vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses. Taking into consideration my intellectual journey I described in chapters 1, 2 and 3, I defined seven minimal selection criteria which I briefly discuss in relation to my case study selection:

- The religious group displays some level of active religious behavior, and there is a reasonable complex of human security threats that results from this behavior (4.3.1).
- The religious group is clearly distinguishable from other groups (adherence to a specific religious belief system is not confusable with other major distinctive characteristics such as ethnicity or cultural identity) (4.3.2).
- There is an advanced degree of failing rule of law and (subnational) undemocratic regime (4.3.3).
- The case is a blind spot on existing RFATs (exclusion of cases where it is obvious that violations of religious freedom take place) (4.3.4).
- The case study has a potential for generalization of findings, or at the very least the application of the RM-VAT contributes something beyond what is already observed by RFATs (4.3.5).
- The specificity of the vulnerability to human security threats is clearly observable (avoidance of cluttered civil conflicts or traditional majority vs minority conflicts, etc.) (4.3.6).
- The analysis of the coping mechanisms by the religious group presents analytical relevance (4.3.7).

4.3.1 Active religious behavior

The delimitation of actively practicing Christians as a religious minority in my first case study (chapter 5) is unusual, but analytically relevant because there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to formulate the hypothesis that it is the more active forms of religious behavior that create vulnerability. The same applies to the group I identify as ‘cultural dissidents’ in the Nasa indigenous *resguardos* of Colombia in my second case study (chapter 6). This group has suffered human rights abuses as a result of its social and political activism, which is inspired by its religious convictions. This is not to say that religious identity and lesser active forms of religious behavior cannot cause vulnerability in both cases, however, the primary reason to select these cases is because a relation can be established between behavior inspired by religious convictions and vulnerability.

In the case study on Cuba (chapter 7), I choose to focus on Christians in general, as not many Christians are socially active. The immediate explanation for this is that those who are socially active, are vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses because the Cuban government does not tolerate it. This case is interesting because it gives the possibility to observe vulnerability in relation to the full continuum of religious identity and behavior.

4.3.2 Clearly distinguishable group

Although actively practicing Christians are not commonly identified as such, they can be analytically distinguished based on indicators of semi-active and active participation that set them apart from the rest of the Mexican population. Actively practicing Christians do not constitute a distinct ethnic group and cannot be confused with any other sociological category. This means that it is possible to interpret the vulnerability to human security threats that this group faces in terms of their religious behavior. The same applies for Christian Cubans who are not a distinct ethnic group but are easily identifiable due to their adherence to Christianity and membership of a registered or non-registered church.

Cultural dissidents in the Nasa community belong to the same ethnic group as all other inhabitants of the Nasa *resguardos*, with the only difference being their religious affiliation and following social and political stances, which can be determined based on their involvement in specific Christian denominations and advocacy groups. The conflict in the Nasa community is an intra-ethnic or minority-within-the-minority type of conflict.

4.3.3 Failing rule of law and undemocratic regime

Although they correspond to very different contexts, the states of Tamaulipas, and to a lesser extent Nuevo León and San Luis Potosí in Mexico, the Nasa indigenous *resguardos* in Colombia and the nation of Cuba have in common that they are undemocratic regimes that are characterized by an advanced degree of failing rule of law and with generic human security challenges. The enforcement of legal provisions for religious freedom is an issue in all three cases, albeit for very different reasons. The first two cases can be identified as “subnational undemocratic regimes”, one because of the pervasive corruption and political infiltration of the drug cartels and the other because the indigenous self-government, by international human rights standards, presents authoritarian features. Cuba is evidently not a democratic country but

is under the political control of an authoritarian regime with a communist ideology. The country presents little subnational variation, although some sources assert that the east of the island seems to be more authoritarian than the west and the Havana area.

4.3.4 Blind spots on Religious Freedom Assessment Tools

For the case studies to be analytically relevant, they must be able to reveal aspects of the vulnerability of religious minorities that are not picked up by RFATs, or at the very least complement them. In all case studies, I take forms of vulnerability into consideration that are not only related to religious self-identification and behavior and I inductively observe human security threats in all spheres of society.

In my first two case studies, the focus on non-state actors as the main responsible party for the vulnerability of religious minorities as well as the focus on the subnational level correspond to blind spots of the RFATs. RFATs do name some marginal restrictions on religious freedom for non-Catholic groups in both Mexico and Colombia and make reference to the specific issues at play in areas affected by organized crime and indigenous communities, but do not assess these dynamics comprehensively.

The problems regarding religious freedom in Cuba seem obvious, as the intolerance of religion of the communist Cuban government is generally recognized by RFATs. However, these tools do not grasp the subtlety of the pressure on Christians, especially when it does not imply physical violence and when it is related to active forms of religious behavior. The added value of the Cuban case is thus that more subtle forms of vulnerability can be discerned in a classic vertical government-citizen context.

4.3.5 Potential for generalization and analytical contribution

The potential for generalization of the findings of the case studies is likely to be highest when similar political-institutional contexts are analyzed, but the RM-VAT could also be applied to very different situations such as threats by armed groups to a religious group or the position of religious minorities within diaspora communities. At the very least, the findings of the case studies can serve to elaborate hypotheses about the vulnerability of religious minorities in comparable contexts, both within and outside Latin America. The case study on actively practicing Christians in northeast Mexico could serve to determine research hypotheses based on the vulnerability of active religious groups for similar crime torn contexts. The case study on cultural dissidents in the Nasa territories in Colombia could serve to determine research hypotheses regarding the vulnerability of religious minorities within other indigenous communities with an advanced degree of self-government. The findings of the case study on Cuban Christians are likely to be generalizable to other communist contexts and possibly to other authoritarian / post-totalitarian regimes.

The analytical contribution of each of the case studies to the understanding of the vulnerability of religious minorities in very different contexts has been stressed sufficiently in the preceding sections. The diversity of the case studies included in this research also suggests the possibility for broader applications of the RM-VAT, including to non-Christian religious minorities in a variety of contexts. Especially observing religious minorities based on behavioral characteristics and at the subnational level is likely to yield new insights.

4.3.6 *Specificity*

In the second sub-assessment of the RM-VAT I assess the specificity of each of the identified human security threats to which the selected religious minority is vulnerable, but the existence of a plausible degree of specificity is also a criterion for the case studies to be included in this research. In all three case studies, this specificity is determined primarily by taking behavioral characteristics of religion into account.

For the case study on northeast Mexico this is particularly important. It would have been practically impossible to observe any variation if I had chosen to focus on Christianity based on the self-identification criterion because this group comprises over 90% of the population. As mentioned earlier, actively practicing Christians are not commonly identified as a minority, nor do they necessarily have a group conscience. However, the distinction can be made analytically, on the basis of their semi-active and active religious behavior, which sets them apart from the majority of Mexicans who self-identify as Christians but do not (visibly) practice it, nor display a specific vulnerability. For the case study on cultural dissidents in the Nasa territories of Colombia a similar point can be made. The threats they face are a direct result of the behavior inspired by their alternative religious convictions.

In Cuba, there is sufficient evidence that points to the fact that Christians receive a different treatment than non-Christians. Socially active Christians may receive similar threats as human rights activists, ‘dissidents’ and journalists, but there is nevertheless a specificity of Christians because the church is the only private (non-state) institution that is allowed to exist.

4.3.7 *Analytical relevance of coping mechanisms*

The analytical relevance of coping mechanisms, or the lack thereof, is the final criterion for the selection of case studies. The diversity in coping mechanisms was also a consideration in the case study selection. Indeed, the case studies display a huge diversity in terms of the coping mechanisms they adopt: in some cases, they are generally lacking, in others they are present but counterproductive or on the contrary quite effective. In the case of northeast Mexico, two initial observations drew my attention. The first was the apparent passivity of a great number of Christians when faced with threats by organized crime, an impression I nuance in chapter 5. The second observation, which partially contradicts the first one, was the widely mediated role of Christian leaders in encouraging the police department of Guadalupe (NL), to actively engage organized crime in the city. In the case of the Nasa indigenous community, the national and international advocacy of people like Ana Silvia Secué initially struck me as an unsuccessful coping mechanism because it seemed to lead to more persecution instead of mitigating it and triggered me to research it more. In Cuba, two parallel dynamics can be observed: on the one hand a forceful generalized ‘internal exit’ but on the other hand the existence of ingenious coping mechanisms through the appeal to international networks, and the practice of ‘staying under the radar’ seemed relevant to observe.

4.4 Data collection

Following Owen's VAT methodology (2003), and considering the circumstances of my fieldwork, I had to approach data collection 'pragmatically', allowing myself to be guided by its availability, instead of following a pre-defined questionnaire or laundry list. I thus compiled any available evidence, in whatever form, that was relevant to describe the human security of the religious minority in its geographical context. Based on extensive fieldwork I collected substantial empirical data that was not previously available.

In all my case studies, this flexible approach to data collection was inevitable. Much data was in fact available, but not in a standardized form. In the case of chapters 5 and 6, I studied religious minorities that are not well known, at least not in the way that I defined them based on their behavioral characteristics. In the case of chapter 7, the delimitation of the religious minority I observed overlaps with most RFATs but there were still lacunas of information, namely, human security threats outside the church sphere, threats that result from religious behavior, and the specific treatment of non-registered denominations and house churches. The first two case studies also focus on remote subnational areas for which much less data is available in general, for both practical and security reasons. In the part of the Mexican territory that is controlled by organized crime, most crimes, including violence against religious minorities, go unreported. In the indigenous communities of Colombia, little is documented too, as they are mostly oral cultures. In communist Cuba, transparent public information is non-existent.

The process for the identification of threats that I followed can be reconstructed as follows. First, I developed an initial threat assessment based on secondary sources. This exercise became the basis of the context description I discussed above. After that, I corroborated and complemented this initial listing of threats by visiting the field, nuancing my initial thoughts and adding qualitative substance to the threats I identified. Finally, I went back to my secondary sources to obtain an extra check on the identified threats. In the case study on Cuba I was able to additionally submit the initial findings of the threat assessment and the resilience assessment to a focus group discussion. Throughout the whole process I thus submitted the identification of threats to various rounds of testing, nuancing and adjusting (triangulation) (Yin 2014:118-129; Glasius e.a. 2018:67-69). The combination and contrasting of information from the RFATs, other secondary sources such as academic and activist literature, newspaper articles, as well as my own fieldwork, provided different pieces of the puzzle. Putting them together allowed a picture to emerge.

For each of the case studies I carried out extensive fieldwork, visiting each country numerous times. Most of my visits to these countries were done as part of my work as a consultant for various faith-based and secular organizations. On average, I held over 40 qualitative interviews with people belonging to a representative range of social actors, stakeholders and analysts (experts active in the field, relief workers, journalists, representatives of religious communities) for each case study. In each of the contexts I already had considerable work experience and established contacts prior to doing the fieldwork. The interviews all took the form of open, informal interviews, aimed at collecting anecdotal evidence and testimonies about the different categories of threats they faced. In addition to the identification of human security threats, the interviews also served as a means to identify mechanisms that are used or could be used to cope with these threats. I sometimes used the contacts of faith-based organizations I had worked with. Occasionally, I had travel partners from these organizations who accompanied me. In each of the case studies I further describe how I conducted my fieldwork.

Although very useful, the information collected through the interviews had two main limitations. The first was that it provided only the subjective perspective of the interviewees, which could have been influenced by what they thought I expected to hear from them for various reasons. The second limitation was that the interviewees at times lacked the analytical categories to situate the violence they were victims of within a broader framework as I aim to do in this research. In the sections about data collection in each case study I explain how I tried to address these issues more in detail.

In general, I always attempted to collect sufficient complementary data from various sources so that they could be contrasted, and patterns can emerge (Yin 2014). I tried as much as possible to reach the ideal of inter-subjectivity, trying to get a minimum of two or three independent opinions on the same topics. As complementary sources to the interviews I used qualitative and quantitative, and public and non-public sources, including scientific articles, expert opinions, incident reports recorded in the media, NGO reports, publicly available statistics, anecdotes, legal documents, data from RFATs and personal testimonies. For example, in chapter 5, I relied more on government reports and local newspapers; in chapter 6, I used court cases and information provided through NGO reports; and in chapter 7, I used scientific articles and RFATs.

4.5 Security risks and ethical challenges

In each of the case studies I provide a detailed description of the particular security risks and ethical challenges I encountered while conducting the fieldwork. Here I make some general comments about this topic. This research strongly benefited from the exposure to the field and the information that my work for civil society organizations allowed me to have. Although the choice of the subject of my dissertation reflects my personal engagement with the issue, I have tried as much as possible to comply with all academic standards by being an unbiased observer. I tried to do this by inventorying human security threats without making any a priori personal or theoretical judgements about the validity of the threats and by not letting my activism get in the way of an honest conduct of my research. In this dissertation, I do not automatically take the side of the religious minorities I studied. For example, in my case study about the Nasa territory in Colombia, I am very critical about Ana Silvia Secué and her advocacy organization, the OPIC. Ultimately, I believe that a fact-based report benefits the situation of religious minorities in indigenous territories more than a passionate and partial manifesto.

Because this research is about human security, the conduct of fieldwork, could be expected to present security risks, both to myself and to the people I interviewed (Glasius e.a. 2018). Concretely, this meant that I had to avoid some locations or cover them through alternative sources such as phone calls or written communication (chapter 5), the review of court cases (chapter 6) or the conduct of some interviews outside the country (chapter 7). It also implied that the names of locations and people needed to be anonymized in all case studies in line with the recommendations formulated by Glasius e.a. (2018:106).

Various ethical questions arose during the conduct of my fieldwork. One of them was that the conduct of interviews may have generated expectations of humanitarian support or of another nature on the part of the interviewees, especially when they represented organizations who depended on funds from external donors or promoted an institutional agenda. In order to receive financial or material support of any kind or for whatever other reason, it was sometimes

possible that my interviewees would exaggerate or on the contrary downplay their situation. Because of any of these reasons, I never used interviews as the only source to assess the nature and intensity of a human security threat. As already mentioned, I systematically cross-checked all information and complemented it with other public sources. Beyond these data validity considerations, I also always made it explicit to my interviewees that I was not in any position to offer them any form of financial support.

I ensured my interviewees gave their informed consent. Except for the fieldwork I conducted in Cuba, I always made it clear to my interviewees that I was working on a research project and that their statements could be quoted. To increase the willingness to give interviews, I systematically announced that their names and places of residence would be anonymized as a security precaution, unless they were well-known figures. Whenever an interviewee requested me not to take notes, not to quote them or to interview them on a particular location, I respected that. Only in Cuba, because of the restrictions of my travel visa and the permanent surveillance, I was forced by the circumstances to present myself as a Dutch tourist and have mostly casual conversations, but even then, I tried to be as open as possible about the purpose of my interviews, which was to understand the religious freedom situation in the country.

It has happened, in Mexico for example, that contacts refused to be interviewed or held back information out of fear. When this happened, I often took it as a confirmation that the representative of the religious minority was indeed under threat, without, however, drawing any further conclusions. At times, the interviewees did not understand the purpose of the research, particularly when they had never thought about their situation from a human security perspective or simply started to perceive their situation as normal. I was always careful not to impose any preconceived position, showing willingness to listen to how the interviewee experiences the human security threats that are faced by him or her (Yin 2014:76-77).

4.6 Concluding remarks: a new tool

In this chapter, I provided the research design for the application of the RM-VAT, a new tool I developed to observe the specific vulnerability of religious minorities in ways that existing frameworks are not suited to do. I outlined the requirements for this tool and defined key concepts, stressing the importance of a behavioral definition of religion to define the boundaries of religious minorities. I also proposed how useful concepts and tools from the human security framework can be adapted to observe the vulnerability of religious minorities. I also laid out the methodological steps for the application of the RM-VAT and provided a rationale for my case study selection.

In the following three chapters I use the RM-VAT to answer the 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?’ This is not only useful to test the application of this new tool, but also to increase my understanding of the vulnerability of religious minorities, In chapter 8 I critically discuss both aspects to answer the question ‘How does the empirical reality of Latin America inform the observation of the specific vulnerability of religious minorities?’