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8. Reflection on the specific vulnerability of religious minorities

My personal and professional involvement in advocacy for religious freedom raised my interest in the topic of the vulnerability of religious minorities. The realization that my empirical observations about vulnerable religious individuals and groups in Latin American countries, such as the examples of Ana Silvia, Daniel and Mario Félix I mentioned in the introduction, are insufficiently detected by existing approaches to religious freedom and by conflict theory in general, led me to formulate my research questions. I used the concept of vulnerability in relation to the broader field of human security to approach religious freedom and religious conflict, following Wellman and Lombardi's invitation to explore the "understudied relationship" between religion and human security (2012). Through the development of a Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT), which I applied to three qualitative case studies, I offered evidence for the proposition that religious minorities are vulnerable in unique ways to suffer human rights abuses. In addition, I demonstrated that observing the vulnerability of religious minorities is a necessary complement to existing approaches that analyze religious freedom and religious conflict.

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the specific vulnerability of religious minorities by looking at four levels which each build onto each other: the main empirical findings of my case studies (8.1), a reflection on the research process (8.2), a methodological evaluation of the RM-VAT in light of the case studies (8.3) and the contributions of this research to the literature (8.4). I then combine these four levels to explore possible areas of future research, benefitting from the methodological innovations of the RM-VAT but also building upon the generalizable empirical findings of the case studies (8.5). I end this chapter by discussing the implications of this research for practitioners and for religious minorities themselves (8.6).

8.1 Empirical value of the case studies

In this section, I summarize the main findings of each of the case studies (8.1.1), before comparing them (8.1.2).

8.1.1 Summary of findings

I applied the RM-VAT to three case studies: the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, Mexico (chapter 5), the vulnerability of cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the *resguardos indígenas* of the southwestern highlands of Colombia (chapter 6) and the vulnerability of Christians in Cuba (chapter 7). In these case studies I highlighted dimensions of the vulnerability of religious minorities that are overlooked by existing tools. I provided evidence for restrictions on religious expression outside the church sphere: in the family, social, business, cultural and government spheres, which are often related to religious behavior and much less to religious identity, providing new empirical information.

My professional work allowed me to gather a lot of information and experience that constituted sources for this research. My personal involvement in the topic, however, did not influence my research in the sense that I did not try to prove any personal conviction, if only, I aimed to raise more awareness about the vulnerability of religious minorities and shed some light on some

understudied dimensions of this vulnerability. Rather, I set out to observe human security threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable, without preconceived notions about what these threats should be.

In my case studies I provided evidence for the possibility that religious behavior can be the cause of human rights abuses. In northeast Mexico, being a nominal Christian is normally not what creates problems with organized crime – Christianity is the majority religion –, but being an actively practicing Christian, especially one involved in social work or human rights activism increases the risk of suffering human rights abuses. In the Nasa indigenous territories, nominal Christianity can sometimes be an issue depending on the Christian denomination one chooses to belong to, but it is mainly the more active forms of religious behavior related for example to political activism that increase risk. In Cuba too, being a Christian is not a major concern – at least not as much as it used to be in the past –, but active religious behavior such as engagement in human rights activism is.

I further observed how non-state actors can cause religious freedom violations, such as organized crime in northeast Mexico or ethnic groups in Colombia. In addition, the focus on the national level leads RFATs to ignore important dynamics that take place at the subnational level such as areas controlled by organized crime or with some form of indigenous self-government. When looking at countries such as Mexico or Colombia at the national level, a picture emerges of countries that have a relative degree of respect for human rights including religious freedom, but such a macro-level picture conceals issues that can only be observed locally. In political science, the analysis of “subnational authoritarianism” has become an object of study (Snyder 2001; Gibson 2005; Giraudy 2010); it is also pertinent for the analysis of religious freedom.

The regulation of religion by organized crime

My first case study, on the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians by criminal violence in the states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí (Mexico), underlines the pertinence of focusing on active religious practice as a source of vulnerability. Indeed, by focusing on active religious practice – instead of on Christianity in general, which would not have allowed me to observe any variation –, I was able to identify specific human security threats that actively practicing Christians face in a context of organized crime, thereby validating my initial observation that organized crime creates vulnerability for religious minorities, and that political instability is a predictor of conflict (Fearon & Laitin 2003; Chayes 2015) and is conducive to the development of subnational undemocratic regimes (Snyder 2001; Gibson 2005; Dabène 2008; Giraudy 2012). This finding contradicts the conventional wisdom that organized crime is not particularly concerned with religion (Schedler 2015; IACHR 2015). The threat assessment revealed clearly that this is not the case.

The former is relevant first from a conceptual perspective. It implies that non-religious motives, such as greed, which is evidently the main driver for organized crime, can lead it to harm religious groups that stand in their way. This particular conclusion is not surprising considering that organized crime can be expected to be driven by rational calculations; however, this had not explicitly been established in relation to religious groups, in part because the distinction between religious identity and religious behavior is not usually made, and in part because RFATs and other tools generally tend to look for religious motives for the ‘persecution’ of

religious groups. As a consequence, non-religious motives for threats to a religious minority that is defined by its behavioral characteristics are overlooked.

This being said, in the case of Los Zetas, religious motives are not completely absent, when comparing this group to other drug cartels. The perpetration of extremely cruel acts of violence that serve more than an instrumental purpose (such as extortion, the elimination of threats or intimidation) can be interpreted in relation to their adherence to the Santa Muerte cult. The human rights abuses that are connected to the imposition of Santa Muerte rituals in church buildings are evidence hereof.

The behavioral delimitation of actively practicing Christians as a religious minority was also relevant for the determination of the specificity of their vulnerability. I established that actively practicing Christians do possess a specific vulnerability to suffer human rights abuses at the hands of organized crime that is a direct consequence of their behavior and therefore not indiscriminate, referring to things like the moral influence of Christian leaders and their unique mobilization capacity. Within the broader debate about whether violence in civil conflicts is indiscriminate or not (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Schedler 2015; Bartman 2018), this case study provides an additional argument to not automatically assume that violence against a particular group is indiscriminate.

Connected to the former, a major finding of this case study that deserves to be researched more in-depth is that organized crime, particularly when it takes over essential functions of the state, actually regulates religion in a similar fashion to communist states and Islamic theocracies (Gill 2008; Grim & Finke 2011; Fox 2013, 2015; Koesel 2014; Cesari 2014; Sarkissian 2015; Philpott 2019).

In a 1985 book chapter, Charles Tilly makes an interesting analogy of war making and state making with organized crime, arguing that the development of states bears much resemblance with the protection rackets that characterize criminal operations. Based on my case study on northeast Mexico I make a similar argument but come at it from the opposite direction: in its regulation of religion (and society in general), organized crime acts very much like a state. Indeed, considering the infiltration and co-optation of the state by organized crime, the threats listed in the threat assessment can be re-interpreted as forms of ‘religious policy’ that are quite similar to what I observed in my case study about Cuba: the intervention in the designation of religious leaders and the elimination of leaders that are critical to the regime, the censorship of the contents of sermons, the imposed curfew, the reporting requirements, the ‘taxation’ through the protection rackets, the restrictions on charitable work, etc. At a minimum, it can be observed that characteristic elements of the regulation of religion by authoritarian governments can also be observed in this case study with the difference that these are not imposed by the state but by organized crime, the *de facto* authority.

Restrictions on religious freedom as a result of unbalanced rights in indigenous resguardos

In my second case study, about the vulnerability of cultural dissidents among the Nasa ethnic group in the resguardos indígenas of the southwestern highlands of Colombia, the relevance of the focus on active religious practice, both to observe human security threats that would otherwise be overlooked and to determine specificity, is once more evident. The behavior of the cultural dissidents, which revolves mainly around their confrontation with the cabildos, is the direct cause of their vulnerability. The religious convictions that lead them to take their

social and political stances, for many of them through the OPIC, is what determines their specificity.

This case study can be interpreted as an intra-ethnic conflict in which collective rights clash with individual rights. In my case study I found that human rights are effectively violated inside the Nasa resguardos, including the rights of religious minorities. This finding is fundamental because, contrary to the various external threats to indigenous groups in Latin American countries, minority-within-the-minority issues are understudied and not addressed in public policy and in legal scholarship (Scolnicov 2011; Pinto 2015). By providing empirical evidence of human rights violations inside the Nasa resguardos, this case study provides a justification for further investigation of the issue of minority rights in indigenous communities.

In a way, the granting of self-determination rights to indigenous communities can be considered as a ‘historical correction’ of the injustice that has been done to these communities since colonial times; however, it has also created a new form of injustice, because it does not have a built-in mechanism in which the religious diversity in indigenous resguardos is guaranteed, as reflected in this case study. Achterhuis & Koning speak of conflicts in which “the means to reduce the fight have become the source of new forms of fighting.” (2017:134) As Matthias Koenig argues, human rights, in particular religious freedom, are readily presented as a solution to the challenge of religious diversity. In reality, he argues, religious freedom remains a contested concept that has been used self-servingly by different groups throughout modern history (2017). This is also the case in the Nasa community where the opposing parties interpret religious freedom differently. The cabildos argue that they cannot allow religious diversity in their resguardos, because it threatens their religious freedom, a view that has been upheld by Colombian judges (Arlettaz 2011). The cultural dissidents also argue for freedom of religion, but they have a more Western, individualistic take on this concept, advocating not only for the freedom to conduct missionary activity but also things like freedom of education and a certain disregard for the collective nature of property rights, which are foreign to indigenous cultures.³²⁸ Paradoxically, the claim to religious freedom seems to be a cause of the conflict, more than it being a solution.

The resilience assessment revealed that it is not only the complex legal situation and the hostility of the cabildos that are at fault, but that the cultural dissidents also share a part of the responsibility. Without justifying the human rights violations the cultural dissidents have been subjected to, their evident lack of social wisdom led them to behave in ways that antagonizes the cabildos and exacerbates the conflict. Indeed, their “adversarial logic”, as I called it (Vargas & Petri 2009), is a direct consequence of their uncompromising religious views and stands in the way of a solution to the conflict. The escalation of the conflict can further be understood from a historical perspective, as both the uncompromising views of the cultural dissidents and the reactions of the cabildos are rooted in past events. Similar dynamics could be observed in African conflicts between indigenous religious communities and Evangelical Christians (Coertzen, Green & Hansen 2015; Sauer, Visscher & Petri 2015; Mayrargue 2017).

The specificity of the vulnerability of cultural dissidents in the Nasa resguardos is based on a similar logic. It is the religious convictions of the cultural dissidents that lead them to display forms of semi-active and active religious behavior in and beyond the church sphere that are perceived as a threat by the cabildos indígenas at two levels. The first is the preoccupation with the protection of the cultural heritage of the Nasa which in their view is put under pressure by

³²⁸ Interview with José Refugio Arellano Sánchez (2016).

individual conversion, growth of churches, missionary activity, refusal to participate in traditional rituals and the rejection of traditional education. This could be interpreted as the violent response that is triggered by a “unitarian” political conception, as Buijs calls it (2013). The second is the fact that the cultural dissidents challenge the authority of the cabildos through their accusations of corruption and their advocacy for democratic reforms, freedom of worship and freedom of education, which has a symbolic meaning as well as financial consequences. This could be interpreted in terms of greed because it refers to a complex of economic and political incentives. At both levels, the specificity of the vulnerability resides in the fact that the threats that the cultural dissidents suffer from are the consequence of the behavior that is inspired by their religious convictions.

The internalization of a restrictive definition of religious freedom by Cuban Christians

My third case study, in which I analyzed the vulnerability of Christians in Cuba, concerns a ‘classic’ case of restrictions of religious freedom by an authoritarian state that most RFATs are well-suited to observe. Although the empirical contribution of this case study is therefore less novel than in the case of the other two, it does nevertheless uncover substantial new information, complementing or nuancing the RFATs in several areas. The first concerns the importance not only to distinguish between religious identity and religious behavior but also to consider the differentiated treatment that the Cuban regime gives to different types of Christianity. As I observed, the threats Christianity faces depend to a large degree on their proximity to the regime and their legal status. Unlike the other two case studies, religious identity therefore constitutes an immediate source of vulnerability in the case of Cuba, but this does not apply equally to all forms of religious identity.

Another area in which this case study makes an empirical contribution concerns the observation of the subtle nature of human security threats that are not picked up by other instruments, either because they are objectively difficult to discern without doing extensive fieldwork in the country, or because they are, in appearance, not directly related to religion. By this I refer to expressions of what Bourdieu would call “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1970): the frustration, intimidation and mistrust that are induced by the communist system, as well as the fabricated charges against religious leaders that are viewed as adversaries of the regime, which create an environment that is very hostile to free religious expression. A connected area is the importance of fear that Cuban Christians experience, which is insufficiently recognized by RFATs.

The finding that Cuban Christians seem to have internalized the restrictive definition of religious freedom as imposed by the communist regime, which equates it to freedom of worship that is strictly apolitical, also stems from the case study. It shows how successful the Cuban regime has been, not at eliminating Christianity or at slowing down its growth, but in unconsciously defining the options for Cuban Christians and the nature of the freedom they aspire to, which is a form of “symbolic violence” to use Bourdieu again. As a result, most Cuban Christians do not engage in education or charitable work, let alone political activism, not only because it is restricted, but more so because they have internalized the perspective that they should not engage in such activities.

Regarding the determination of specificity, in this case study I argued that although Christians who engage in active forms of religious behavior may face similar threats as secular political dissidents and therefore have a low specificity, it is nevertheless possible to determine their

specificity in virtue of the competing legitimacy between religion and the state (Scolnicov 2011) and its unique mobilization capacity and international connections (Koesel 2014).

In terms of resilience, the spiritual endurance of Cuban Christians has no comparison with the other two case studies. Indeed, Cuban Christians have endured persecution, of varying intensity through time and depending on the type of Christianity, for much longer than actively practicing Christians in northeast Mexico and cultural dissidents in the Nasa resguardos. This has probably given Cuban Christians the opportunity to better develop coping mechanisms, which was more difficult for Christians in northeast Mexico, where the human security concerns are much more recent but also more violent. Other noteworthy features of the resilience of Cuban Christians is their apparent compliance with government instructions while at the same time taking advantage of legal loopholes, the ‘forced invention’ of the house church model and their acute sense of social wisdom.

In Cuba, the specificity of the vulnerability of Christians can be understood as a function of three elements: Cuba’s religious policy (which has evolved over time), the proximity of the religious denomination to the regime and its legal status, and the type of religious behavior of the religious minority. Some of these elements are related to the ideological hostility of the Cuban regime toward religion in general and some are related to the repression of political dissidents, but in all cases there are particular characteristics of Christianity that must be considered such as their mobilization capacity, their moral influence, their competing claim to legitimacy and its international contacts (in the case of the Catholic Church, the status of the Vatican as a foreign state). For these reasons, it can be maintained, for example, that there is some degree of specificity to the vulnerability of Christian human rights activists in comparison to non-Christian (secular) human rights activists.

8.1.2 Comparison

I focus my comparison of the findings of my case studies around three points. The first point is that vulnerability increases when the religious minority constitutes an ideological alternative to the powers that be. A common denominator in all three cases is that vulnerability increases when the behavior of the religious minority is perceived as threatening by, respectively, the drug cartels, the cabildos indígenas or the Communist Party. Confessing one’s adherence to Christianity in northeast Mexico, converting to Christianity without ceasing to participate in indigenous rituals in the Nasa resguardos, and apolitical worship in Cuba, normally do not increase vulnerability. The greater threats appear with the more active forms of religious behavior, such as criticism of the (*de facto*) authorities or engaging in activities that directly threaten their interests. In the first case study this involves forms of religious behavior such as work with youths, drug rehabilitation or human rights activism that are perceived as a threat to organized crime and are therefore met with reprisals.

In the Nasa resguardos and in Cuba, semi-active religious behavior takes on a symbolic meaning that triggers violent responses. For example, as Goldenziel explains, the mere fact of joining a minority religion can constitute an implicit political statement against the regime (2009) and so does conversion in cultures like the Nasa that are characterized by the “assumption of singular affiliation” (Sen 2006) in which all members are expected to share the same religion. In the Nasa resguardos this involves physical attacks on church services and in Cuba and northeast Mexico censorship of the content of church sermons.

A pattern that emerges from the different threat assessments is that human security threats seem to increase with the more active forms of religious behavior. In northeast Mexico, religion is an alternative, especially for young men, for a life in the drug cartels. In southwest Colombia, the cultural dissidents promote an alternative vision for education and more generally an alternative conception of indigenism. In Cuba, Christians, through their behavior but also by their mere presence, represent an alternative to the state and the communist ideology.

The second point of comparison between the case studies is that vulnerability can sometimes constitute an opportunity, as vulnerable groups are easily taken advantage of. This is most visible in the case of actively practicing Christians in northeast Mexico where semi-active forms of religious behavior, such as church attendance, create vulnerability for religious minorities for the simple reason that engaging in this type of behavior increases the risk of kidnap-for-ransom or extortion. As I described, churches and businesses of Christians are not only viewed as revenue centers but are also considered as easy preys that do not offer resistance because churches wish to be welcoming to visitors and because moral convictions of Christians often lead them to reject violence even in the case of self-protection. In Cuba too, this dynamic can be observed. Churches were hoping to become less dependent on the state and foreign donors by supporting the elaboration of small businesses, but when these grow too much this attracts the attention of the government.

The third point concerns the great variation in coping mechanisms among the case studies. When comparing all three case studies, the first remark that can be made is that coping mechanisms are generally underdeveloped. Most of my interviewees seemed to have little awareness about how they could 'arm' themselves against human security threats for a wide range of different reasons, including the adherence to pietistic theological options that discourages any involvement in society (in all cases), fear (northeast Mexico and Cuba), the acceptance ('normalization') of violence (in northeast Mexico) and the internalization of a restrictive definition of religious freedom as imposed by the regime (Cuba). Braun's finding that religious minorities are more inclined to help other vulnerable religious minorities or themselves (2016) seems only partly applicable to my case studies. The cultural dissidents in the Nasa resguardos, by contrast, are very militant, but this actually increased the threats they faced.

Possibly because of the low levels of awareness of the need to reflect on the development of resilience, social wisdom is also underdeveloped, with the notable exception of Cuban Christians, who have learned to be cautious in order to be able to survive within the system. The few outliers in Cuba who choose to adopt a more militant path are criticized by their peers for not having any actual impact. In the Nasa resguardos, notwithstanding the warnings of a select few, most cultural dissidents, particularly the ones that are affiliated to the OPIC, refuse to adopt a prudent attitude at all, rather, they are convinced that they act in obedience to their faith and are willing to suffer the consequences. In northeast Mexico the drug cartels are rarely confronted by actively practicing Christians, who often prefer to take refuge in avoidance and compliance strategies. In such contexts, fear, not social wisdom, prevents actively practicing Christians from openly confronting the drug cartels, but it also implies that other coping mechanisms, such as the establishment of early warning networks or the engagement of private security to at least mitigate some of the risks, are rarely considered.

Through the interviews I conducted, I found that asking members of religious groups about coping mechanisms helps them to critically reflect on what they are presently doing to defend themselves against human security threats. This contributes to greater self-awareness, which I

could observe through the conduct of focus group session with a selection of Cuban leaders. I come back to this point in section 8.5.3.

This being said, coping mechanisms are not at all absent in my case studies. Avoidance and compliance, including formal compliance with government regulations while disrespecting their spirit in the case of Cuba, are frequently used. Cuban Christians and cultural dissidents both benefit from strong international support, which also translates into the implementation of solidarity mechanisms to mitigate some threats; this is largely absent for actively practicing Christians in northeast Mexico.

The relation between religion and resilience is no doubt complex and multifaceted. It seems correct to assume that an important reason why people are attracted to one or the other religion, is because of the expectation that this religion can provide some sort of relief from the hardships of the world. Throughout the case studies I was able to confirm that religious convictions can at times be a source of resilience, because it helps making sense of difficult situations, offers hope and religious communities can also provide solidarity. In all three cases, there are examples of cases in which spiritual endurance and moral authority commands some respect that sometimes serves to mitigate threats.

Collective action exists in all cases, but it is understandably difficult to use this coping mechanism when faced with severe human security threats and paralyzing fear. Its impact is also limited when it is not combined with social wisdom. The discreet advocacy work by Cuban Christians and the collaboration between Christian leaders and the police department in Guadalupe (Mexico), are positive exceptions.

I found that collective action can be a double-edged sword. This is because there are times when the very initiatives that religious minorities undertake to defend themselves lead to an increased vulnerability. For example, the creation of solidarity networks or the establishment of advocacy initiatives, which are initially designed to mitigate threats, can have the opposite effect of drawing attention to a religious minority, which could increase its vulnerability. This evidently happened in the Nasa resguardos, where the creation of the OPIC was initially conceived as an instrument to combat several forms of injustice, but actually increased them. In northeast Mexico, initiatives to mitigate the influence of organized crime on youths are met with hostility when faith-based organizations and drug cartels compete for influence. The former connects with the philosophical paradox that Nussbaum identifies as “the fragility of goodness” (1986) which I discussed in chapter 2. If one seeks to improve one’s conditions, one must confront the world, but the mere fact of doing so also exposes oneself. As Butler puts it, protesting against precarity increases risk (2016).

Beyond internal-theological explanations, it is also important to consider differences in actors and context to explain the differences in coping mechanisms among vulnerable religious minorities. The coping mechanisms of Cuban Christians are more developed than in the subnational areas of Mexico and Colombia I studied, but this could be because its context is characterized by a prolonged vertical (state) oppression of religion whereas the other two contexts correspond to more sudden forms of repression by non-state actors. It could therefore be relevant to research the impact on the development of coping mechanisms in different contexts: prolonged and sudden repression (vertical and horizontal repression).

8.2 Reflection on the research process

The main benefits of the data collection process of the RM-VAT are its flexibility and context-sensitivity, because it allows the incorporation of all available sources without discriminating between their nature and source, the only criterion being that they must be relevant to describe human security threats, following Owen's recommendation (2003). This meant that I could use any available sources: anecdotal evidence gathered through fieldwork, survey data, newspaper articles, jurisprudence, internal reports of local NGO's, jurisprudence and even pertinent data from RFATs. By contrasting these sources, a picture emerged that is more complete than for example the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) by the Pew Research Center that are restricted to a self-imposed selection of sources. Together with the broad conceptual scope of the RM-VAT, this approach to data collection, which characterizes qualitative research in general, was therefore instrumental to produce more empirical information than other tools.

This pragmatic approach to data collection was also a necessity considering the limitations of data collection at the local level (Owen 2003), in human security contexts in general (Glasius e.a. 2018) and in oral cultures like the Nasa. In all my case studies, for example, survey data on active forms of religious behavior was absent, but I could compensate this by interviewing religious people that displayed active religious behavior. In the case study on the Nasa resguardos, I could not directly interview the cabildos, but I was able to obtain their testimonies through the internal reports of a local NGO and through their public statements in court cases. Because most human rights abuses are not reported in contexts like northeast Mexico and Cuba, I could not consult police records, but I was able to identify this through press reports (some of which have been included in the Violent Incidents Database of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America) and through personal interviews.

In spite of its advantages, this approach to data collection also has its limitations at several levels. The first is that the RM-VAT relies heavily on anecdotal evidence gathered through interviews, which implies methodological weaknesses in terms of "bias due to poorly articulated questions; response bias; inaccuracies due to poor recall; reflexivity – interviewee gives what interviewer wants to hear" (Yin 2014:106,110-113). To mitigate the bias due to poorly articulated questions in my case studies I consistently tried to guide my interviewees to share about the human security threats they suffered using the table that crosses the spheres of society and the continuum of religious identity and behavior as a mental *aide-mémoire* (figure 4.3).

I tried to deal with response bias and reflexivity through data triangulation which in my case studies consisted in experimental confirmation through similar conversations to approximate inter-subjectivity, comparison through similar contexts and by, as much as possible, contrasting the findings of the interviews with various secondary sources.

In the case study on northeast Mexico I referred to literature about organized crime in Latin America. In the case study on the Nasa resguardos I discussed legal scholarship about other minority-within-the-minority conflicts. In the case study on Cuba, I contrasted literature on religious regulation in other communist and authoritarian regimes. When relevant, I also cited empirical data about similar political-institutional contexts that I collected myself through my work for various NGO's including the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, or through reports of other researchers and civil society organizations.

In the realm of response bias, emotions also played an important role in the interviews I conducted. In northeast Mexico, fear implied that many people I approached either held back information or refused to be interviewed altogether. In the Nasa resguardos, the anger of the cultural dissidents similarly influenced their response, as well as their political agenda in the case of members of the OPIC. In the case of Cuba, I had to be attentive to the ideological proximity of my interviewees to the communist regime, which also influenced the views they expressed. Again, data triangulation and the aim of inter-subjectivity was how I tried to mitigate the impact of these issues.

Notwithstanding the former, it is important to remember that subjective data is not the same as unreliable, corrupt and unusable data. Owen notes that “a degree of subjectivity is healthy to the assessment” and is “[how] meaningful information can be attained.” (2003:61-62) Subjectivity must therefore be accepted while at the same time “mitigated by local knowledge and disciplinary experts” (op. cit. 35).

Response bias is also related to the self-awareness about both threats and coping mechanisms, which turned out to be a major issue in all three case studies, although for very different reasons. In northeast Mexico, because of the normalization of violence and the theological reasons I already mentioned, many actively practicing Christians I interviewed had come to accept the human security threats they faced as a normal part of life, which implied that they often did not interpret human security threats in relation to religious freedom and also did not develop a reflection about coping mechanisms. In the case of the Nasa resguardos, the indigenous holistic worldview of my interviewees implied that they did not intuitively establish a distinction between different spheres of society. The internalization of the restrictive definition of religious freedom as imposed by the communist regime in Cuba made it difficult for my interviewees to discern restrictions on religious freedom beyond the church sphere. This all meant that I had to keep my questions as simple as possible, with the aim of finding out what human security threats they face and what coping mechanisms they use, but not burdening my interviewees with the categorization of the human security threats on the continuum of religious identity and behavior and by spheres of society.

The matter of reflexivity played out at different levels in the contexts of my case studies. At a general level, a risk was that some interviewees would indeed say what they thought I wanted to hear, although I could mitigate this by applying the data triangulation method to confirm facts, and by systematically distinguishing between perceptions and verifiable facts (perceptions can have informational value too). As I mentioned in my descriptions of ethical challenges, I was sometimes faced with interviewees who had expectations that I would be able to broker some form of humanitarian support for them, particularly in the cases of Cuba and the Nasa resguardos, which could have influenced the answers to the questions I asked. What I did to avoid this risk was to clarify the purpose of my interview, multiply the number of interviews with similar sources to reduce this risk (inter-subjectivity) and have multiple interviews with the same sources over time allowing me to build a relationship of trust.

To avoid inaccuracies due to poor recall, I kept a record of all my documentation including my field notes (I could not record any of my interviews for security reasons) and I made my chain of evidence explicit in the description of each of the human security threats, following Yin (2014:118-129).

8.3 Methodological evaluation of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool

In this section, I critically look at the RM-VAT itself by discussing its main methodological strengths and weaknesses, which mirror each other to some extent: methodological innovations (8.3.1), the scope of the empirical observation (8.3.2), replicability (8.3.3), generalizability and comparability (8.3.4) and determination of specificity (8.3.5). In 8.3.6 I round up this section with a synthesis.

8.3.1 Methodological innovations

Based on my adaptation-operationalization of the human security paradigm in chapter 4, I developed a “Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool” (RM-VAT) which allowed me to observe certain types of vulnerability of religious minorities that are not noticed by the existing approaches. The tool introduced four major conceptual-methodological innovations.

First, the use of the notion of vulnerability to analyze religious freedom violations constitutes the main conceptual innovation of my research (see annex J for the definitions of the key concepts used in this research). Borrowing from geography, the concept of vulnerability allows operationalizing the human security framework through the vulnerability assessment methodology. Because vulnerability “addresses the nature of the impact itself” (Owen 2003:11), this methodology makes it possible to fully observe both latent and manifest human security threats against religious minorities, moving beyond narrowly defined approaches that are common in conflict theory and human rights monitoring.

Second, the RM-VAT, following the open-ended approach – the lens – it borrows from the human security perspective, is designed to observe essential elements that are not observed by existing frameworks. These elements cover different analytical parameters such as vulnerability based on religious identity and vulnerability based on semi-active and active religious behavior, threats caused by both state and non-state actors, individual and collective forms of vulnerability, different dimensions of religious freedom (restrictions on religious expression in different spheres of life), and the possibility of focusing on the subnational level. All this makes it possible to observe aspects of religious freedom violations that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Third, the RM-VAT attempts to describe degrees of specificity of human security threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable, providing analytical clarity in what are frequently cluttered conflict situations. Often, human security threats to religious groups risk being dismissed as ‘collateral damage’ in which the role of religious convictions and behavior as a source of vulnerability is not recognized. Being able to determine that a particular religious individual or group suffered a particular threat because of factors that are relatable to religion makes this recognition possible. Often, the degree of specificity of a particular threat to a religious individual or group is not absolute; in any conflict situation, religion should rather be viewed as one element among others.

Fourth, the RM-VAT interrogates the resilience of religious minorities by looking at the coping mechanisms they adopt or could adopt to reduce their vulnerability to human security threats. In line with one of the central tenets of the human security paradigm, vulnerable groups are not considered as passive subjects or victims of persecution, but as active players who can develop

responses to the human security threats they face. This provides interesting analytical categories because it allows contrasting the intensity of human security threats that are faced by a particular religious minority with its capacity to cope with these threats. It also allows for the development of recommendations for the improvement of the resilience of vulnerable religious minorities.

8.3.2 *Scope of empirical observation*

The methodological question that arises when considering my empirical findings is whether I could have obtained the same results if I had not used the RM-VAT but had followed a traditional qualitative approach around a selection of research questions. New empirical knowledge could indeed have been obtained without the RM-VAT, considering my personal knowledge and experience living and working in the countries I studied, but the added value of this tool resides in four aspects.

The first is that it serves as an *aide-mémoire* to consider threats that occur in all spheres of society considering the full continuum of religious identity and behavior, as already mentioned. In connection with this, the second aspect is that the RM-VAT constitutes a helpful instrument to organize all available knowledge, collected through fieldwork and secondary sources, into three comprehensive sub-assessments: the threat assessment, the specificity assessment and the resilience assessment, a point that Owen also makes in the discussion of his VAT (2003).

The third aspect is its focus on observation before interpretation. The major difference between the RM-VAT and the RFATs on the one hand, and the theoretical frameworks discussed in chapter 2 on the other, regards the issue of observation. Indeed, whereas the RM-VAT and the RFATs seek to observe violations of religious freedom, most theoretical frameworks are primarily concerned with explaining the causes of conflict, including religious conflicts. This is most evident in the case of the literature about the determinants of conflict (the schools that offer explanations of conflict in terms of grievance, greed or opportunity). This is also true for the analyses that are more directly related to religion: Girard interprets conflicts in terms of “mimetic desire” (1989); Sen views “the assumption of single affiliation” as prone to violence (2006); Gill explains the regulation of religion as a function of political interests (2008); Grim & Finke interpret religious persecution as the consequence of religious regulation (2011); Nussbaum explains religious discrimination as a result of irrational fear (2013); Hurd affirms that the qualifier ‘religious’ risks exacerbating conflicts (2015).

As I already stated, a concern for the purpose of my research is that these theories clog the observation because they imply a focus on one or a selection of variables and ignore others that could very well be decisive factors. For this reason, I argued that the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities should take place before seeking to empirically validate theoretical models that may not reflect the reality of a particular context. In my case studies, I do give interpretations of the human security threats I identify, but I withhold my judgment until after the observation, in agreement with the open-ended nature of the human security perspective I adopted.

The fourth aspect is that the RM-VAT observes more by casting the net wider. As discussed in my review of RFATs in section 3.1, I identified four points in which I believe the RFATs fall short for the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities in the Latin American contexts of my case studies and possibly other contexts: they are insufficiently holistic, neglect

the local scale, have a state bias and use a restrictive definition of religion. In the design of the RM-VAT I address the first point by getting rid of laundry lists of indicators of religious freedom. As I explained, these lists of indicators, no matter how comprehensive, will never cover all the possible restrictions on religious expression, nor can they be taken as proxies for them in Latin American contexts, as my initial empirical observations suggest. The RM-VAT observes threats without being restricted by a predetermined set of indicators. In addition, the self-reporting of the people I interviewed for my case studies about the human security threats they face contributed to maintain an open-ended outlook.

To address the three other shortcomings of the RFATs for the observation of the vulnerability of religious minorities in the political-institutional contexts I set out to study, I introduced a number of conceptual shifts, which are inspired by the two paradigm shifting features of the human security paradigm (Glasius 2008) that are most relevant to my research as I described in section 3.2: shifting security and a shift towards the subjects of security. These conceptual shifts are the behavioral definition of religion and of religious minority (operationalized through the continuum of religious identity and behavior), the multidimensional understanding of religious freedom (operationalized through the concept of spheres of society), the focus on the subject of human security (the religious minority itself) instead of on the structural conditions that lead to human insecurity, and the conscious choice to consider non-state actors, non-religious motives and, when pertinent, the subnational level.

The RM-VAT's methodological aim is precisely to cast the net wider than existing frameworks and tools. Particularly the inclusion of behavioral aspects of religion and the approach in terms of spheres of society set the RM-VAT apart from other tools. As explained, most RFATs restrict the observation to religious identity and only some forms of religious behavior, as well as to the observation of violations of religious freedom in the church sphere (freedom of worship) and a limited selection of aspects of other spheres of society. Operationalizing the behavioral definition of religion and the multidimensional understanding of religious freedom, the RM-VAT views religion not as a social sphere – the church or its equivalents in other religions (mosque, synagogue, temple, etc.) are spheres – but as a phenomenon that expresses itself in all spheres of society (Petri & Visscher 2015).

In the RM-VAT, I also discarded the use of the concept of 'religious persecution' that is central to most RFATs. Beyond the competing acceptations of this term and its inflationary use, it places too much emphasis on the perpetrators of this persecution and their intentions, thereby implying the neglect of non-religious motives and forms of vulnerability that are the result of unfavorable circumstances rather than of deliberate acts by individuals or groups. All three case studies included in this research provide examples of religious groups that suffer human rights abuses for non-religious reasons such as the 'commercial' motives (greed) of organized crime in northeast Mexico to extort Christian leaders (chapter 5), the political economy reasons of indigenous Nasa leaders in Colombia to reject religious conversions because they lose access to education subsidies (chapter 6) and the political considerations of the Cuban communist regime who refuse to share influence with churches (chapter 7). As I argued in section 3.3.3, even when the concept of religious persecution is defined broadly to cover all the aspects I discussed in this research, it is essentially an object-oriented notion, whereas the RM-VAT expressly adopts a subject orientation.

8.3.3 *Replicability*

A limitation that follows from my reliance of anecdotal evidence concerns the replicability of the data collection which is reduced because of practical and security reasons. Indeed, the conduct of the fieldwork is very labor intensive (I give some suggestions in section 8.5.3 to try to make the application of the RM-VAT to multiple cases more ‘doable’), requires a solid personal network like the one I benefitted from thanks to my institutional affiliations and can involve substantial security risks for the researcher. Beyond these considerations, replicability is also reduced by the role of the interpretation of the researcher, especially when developing the threat assessment. A legitimate question is whether another researcher would have arrived at the same lists of threats as I did, because the content of the threat assessments is not immediately self-evident. It is fair to say that interpretation indeed plays an important role in this process and that another researcher could therefore arrive at different conclusions by interviewing other people or by noticing aspects I paid less attention to.

Yet, because of the intrinsic heuristic value of my case studies, another researcher may certainly identify slightly different threats or vary in the qualifications of these threats, but the essence of the threat assessments should not vary substantially if sufficient sources are consulted, because roughly the same threats should show up. Moreover, because the matrix that crosses spheres of society with the continuum of religious identity and behavior guides the observation, similar outcomes should be expected. Finally, the consistency of the data triangulation with secondary sources further ensures the replicability of the findings.

The observations made in the case studies should certainly be transparent and verifiable, but it could be asked whether replicability should be a methodological goal of the RM-VAT. The stated aim of this research, and the purpose for which the RM-VAT was developed, is to advance in the observation of the specific vulnerability of religious minorities, which the RM-VAT does because it yields new empirical information. The replicability of the findings is an additional benefit, but it is not its primary goal. Furthermore, one can go too far in trying to ensure replicability and more generally maximizing accuracy and reliability of the data, because it can stand in the way of an inductive observation of threats. As Owen asserts, “It is precisely this mentality that leads to a discarding of all data but the vague national level indicators produced by International Organizations. The fact is that much of the data are collected with integrity and reasonable accuracy.” (2003:61). So, although replicability in itself is an important requirement, it should not be made into a *condicio sine qua non* for the viability of the RM-VAT, as this could imply that important, but difficult to acquire, knowledge is not acquired at all.

8.3.4 *Generalizability and comparability*

Considering the research design I adopted (the diverse case method), the generalizability of my findings presents inevitable limitations (Herron & Quinn 2016). As Seawright & Gerring claim, “Diverse cases are likely to be representative in the minimal sense of representing the full variation of the population. (Of course, they may not mirror the distribution of that variation in the population.)” (2008:297). Due to the methodological issue of sampling, this means that the findings of my case studies are theoretically only generalizable to other cases that correspond to the same typical sub-types of my case studies.

I believe that the general picture of the threat assessments can be generalized because the identified threats possess an intrinsic heuristic value, which can be inferred from similar observations in similar contexts. In this research I referred to fieldwork I conducted myself in other crime torn areas within Mexico and in other Latin American countries, particularly Colombia and El Salvador, in which I identified similar threats to the ones I identified in my case study on northeast Mexico. The same is true for my case study on the Nasa resguardos which present similar patterns of threats in other indigenous communities I studied in Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala. In Venezuela and Bolivia I observed threats to religious expression that are comparable to Cuba. The generalization of my findings to other contexts outside Latin America is likely to be more difficult, but at the very least the findings of my case studies can serve to elaborate hypotheses for research in similar political-institutional contexts, as I suggest in section 8.5.1. Moreover, notwithstanding the limitations to the generalizability of the findings of my case studies, as a tool, the RM-VAT could be applied to a broader set of cases, as I discuss in section 8.5.2.

As I already mentioned, the benefit of the inductive perspective of the RM-VAT is that it casts the net wider and has the versatility to yield meaningful results in very different political-institutional contexts. At the same time, its downside is that every case study is substantially different which somewhat hinders comparability. As a result, quantitative cross-national comparisons as the RFATs do are literally impossible. In theory, it should be possible to adapt the RM-VAT into a quantitative instrument, but it would imply sacrificing its holistic nature to a large extent, and returning to a laundry list approach, which is precisely what the RM-VAT intends to avoid. This being said, using a qualitative approach, comparisons can be made in which characteristics of the political-institutional context are treated as independent variables and the vulnerability of a particular religious minority as the dependent variable.

8.3.5 Determination of specificity

A final methodological point I would like to discuss relates to the determination of specificity. Above, I already discussed the methodological innovation of the specificity assessment – a sliding scale to determine degrees of specificity instead of a binary variable – and how this allows me to overcome the problematic reflex that “if there is no maximum degree specificity, there is no specificity at all” that characterizes most studies on religious persecution which consequently only observe threats that have a maximum degree of specificity and discard relevant threats that have lower degrees of specificity. My approach to specificity thus allows me to observe more, and be more nuanced in my observation.

There are three methodological concerns, however, with the determination of specificity as I did in the specificity assessment that deserve to be mentioned here. The first concerns precision. When executing the second step of the RM-VAT, I found that it is certainly possible to approximate some degree of specificity, even when human security threats are not exclusively applicable to religious minorities, but moving beyond a three degree scale of specificity does not seem feasible. Distinguishing between low, medium and high degrees of specificity is probably the highest level of precision that can be obtained. This being said, determining specificity with more precision than a three degree scale is probably not necessary.

Establishing specificity is further complicated in cases where there are no other religious or non-religious group to establish a comparison with. In the case of northeast Mexico, I could establish specificity by comparing the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians to the

vulnerability of secular activists and journalists, and in the case of Cuba, I could establish specificity by comparing the vulnerability of Christians to the vulnerability of other religious groups and human rights activists. In the case of the Nasa resguardos, however, the cultural dissidents are the only group I identified that stands up against the resguardos. By extension, its vulnerability presents a large degree of specificity because it is the only group that possesses this vulnerability. I could only speculate to what extent similar threats could also have applied to other groups.

The third concerns the relation between specificity and intensity. Specificity and intensity are not the same. Establishing that a particular threat has a higher degree of specificity for a particular religious minority, is not the same as saying that this religious minority suffers more than other groups. Based on the data I collected in the case studies and the impossibility to determine how widespread or representative the identified threats are this is impossible. For my case studies, I am only capable of justifying for which threats the vulnerability of religious minorities have a higher degree of specificity, not whether these minorities actually suffer more than other groups. This is in itself already an important methodological contribution of this research, but to go further and establish the comparative intensity of the vulnerability of religious minorities is not possible since the data that link active forms of religious behavior with vulnerability to human security threats are not available.

8.3.6 Synthesis: the RM-VAT as a complement to other tools and frameworks

The RM-VAT was developed as a result of my dissatisfaction with existing frameworks and tools to adequately observe the vulnerability of religious minorities in selected Latin American contexts. In this dissertation, I have argued its pertinence as a tool that yields additional empirical information and mends the gaps of other frameworks. It has its limitations too, particularly in the field of quantification and the determination of specificity, as I explained above. For this reason, the RM-VAT should be viewed as a complement, rather than a substitute to existing tools.

Although the RM-VAT indeed observes aspects of the vulnerability of religious minorities that are not detected by existing tools and frameworks fail to reveal, it is not better on all points. For example, the RM-VAT is not suited for cross-national whole of country rankings and comparisons which the RFATs are. The RM-VAT also does not claim any causality or generalizable explanatory power, which other frameworks do. Therefore, the RM-VAT should be viewed as a complement to existing frameworks and tools which continue to have their place. The RM-VAT merely highlights dimensions that are less intuitive but at the same time very real in terms of the human security concerns they raise.

8.4 Contributions to the literature

In this section I discuss some contributions to the literature that can be made based on the empirical observations and the conceptual developments made in this research. I mirror my discussion on chapters 2 and 3, consecutively presenting my contributions to interpretative models of the vulnerability of religious minorities (8.4.1), to RFATs (8.4.2) and to human security (8.4.3).

8.4.1 *Applications of interpretative models of the vulnerability of religious minorities*

Although it was not my aim to empirically validate the interpretative models described in chapter 2—my aim was to better observe the vulnerability of religious minorities, not to explain them—, I did find elements of these models to be applicable to explain some of the human security threats I identified in my case studies. I also identified aspects of these theories that could be adjusted. I present four building blocks that could be integrated into a comprehensive explanatory theory of the vulnerability of religious minorities.

The first building block is the importance of adopting a multifactorial approach to analyze religious conflicts and conflicts in general. This is very clear when observing the debate about the determinants of conflict. In my case studies, I have shown that each of the popular determinants – grievance (Cederman, Gleditsch & Buhaug 2013; Gurr 2016 [1970]); greed (Collier & Hoeffler 2004) and opportunity (Fearon & Laitin 2003; Collier, Hoeffler & Rohner 2009) – are factors that contribute to the vulnerability of religious minorities, without any one of them being the single most decisive factor. Although it is true that in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, the actor that is responsible for the vast majority of the human security threats to actively practicing Christians, Los Zetas, operates out of greed, grievance-based factors should also be considered in view of the inspiration this group finds in the Santa Muerte cult. Yet, the violence of this drug cartel only became possible because of a context of extreme corruption, lawlessness and impunity, providing the opportunity for violence.

A similar analysis can be made about the indigenous territories in the southwestern highlands of Colombia. At one level of analysis, the religious agenda of the cultural dissidents enters into conflict with the cabildos who have various reasons to resent this group. One of them is their concern with the preservation of the cultural homogeneity of the Nasa as an ethnic group which they believe is threatened by cultural dissidents who display deviant social behavior to use Durkheim's concept (1893). Another reason is rooted in political economy: their fear of losing political influence and economic subsidies leads them to implement identity manipulation strategies, paraphrasing Schlee (2008). Above all, it is the advanced self-government faculties of the resguardos, in combination with their geographical remoteness that gives them the opportunity to violently repress the cultural dissidents. In this conflict, the different determinants of conflict that conflict literature presents are all present: grievance, greed and opportunity; not in opposition to each other, but as complementary interpretations (Ballentine & Sherman 2003; Weinstein 2007; Owen 2003; Achterhuis & Koning 2017).

The determinants of conflicts approach is less useful to explain the situation of Cuba, which is a classic form of authoritarian government that uses “structural violence” (Galtung 1969). Yet, some form of grievance could be observed through the antireligion political ideology that is an integral part of the communist government system (Sarkissian 2015). Greed, too, is not totally absent in the Cuban case. On the island, social work of religious group is restricted but for a different reason than in northeast Mexico, namely because it competes with the legitimacy of the state, following Weber (1919) and more recently Scolnicov (2011).

As these paragraphs show, the different theoretical frameworks offer complementary explanations for the same themes or are applicable at different moments in time. There is, however, not a single theory that provides a comprehensive explanatory framework for all forms of vulnerability of religious minorities. This suggests that these theories should be used concurrently, as pieces to the puzzle, but avoiding deterministic and mono-causal approaches.

A second building block is the recognition of the fluidity between state and non-state actors. Connecting with the literature on subnational undemocratic regimes, two of my case studies focus on the subnational level and on non-state actors. I show that frameworks that have been developed to explain the actions of the state, can also be used to analyze non-state actors. This is very obvious in northeast Mexico, where drug cartels have taken over traditional positions of the state, and effectively regulate religion. This is also the case when considering the indigenous authorities of the Nasa community, who run an authoritarian government system without recognition of individual rights.

Another example of the application to non-state actors of theories that were developed to analyze the state is the concept of “political origins of religious liberty” developed by Gill (2008), which can be used not only to interpret the evolutions in Cuba’s religious policy as Goldenziel does (2009), but also to interpret the vulnerability of religious minorities in the indigenous territories of Colombia. Indeed, the advanced degree of self-government in indigenous territories does not constitute a political incentive to guarantee religious freedom in these territories. Stretching the scope of the theory, it could even be applied to the areas controlled by the drug cartels in northeast Mexico who, acting as the *de facto* political authority, have little interest in guaranteeing religious freedom.

The third building block, which I have insisted upon a lot throughout this research, is the relevance of considering the consequences of behavior alongside identity as a source of vulnerability. This must be done systematically in conflict theory, in particular to consider types of conflicts that do not run along ethnic (identity) lines, such as the minority-within-the-minority conflict in the Nasa indigenous territories. I discuss some theoretical applications of this here, and come back to the practical implications of measuring behavioral aspects of religion in the next section.

Regarding the relation between religious identity and vulnerability, I found Sen’s perspective on the dangers of the “assumption of singular identification” (2006) to be applicable to the Nasa community of Colombia where converts to Christianity are no longer considered as indigenous, which in turn constitutes a justification for their social exclusion. To some extent, this is also the case in Cuba where Christians in practice are considered as second class citizens. I did not, however, find this perspective to be applicable to my case study on northeast Mexico, in which identity plays a much smaller role.

Yet, even when identity explains the vulnerability of a religious minority, I found that it rarely is the only factor. In the case of the Nasa community, although identity is part of the problem, other factors come into play too, including political economy considerations, for which Schlee’s interpretation of identity manipulation based on cost-benefit calculations is helpful (2008). As I found, one of the reasons why conversion to Christianity is resisted by the indigenous authorities in the Nasa resguardos, is because it implies a reduction in money transfers from the central government. A similar dynamic can be observed in northeast Mexico, where the Los Zetas cartel opposes any action by actively practicing Christians that directly threaten their interests, such as the conversion of their members, work with youths or drug rehabilitations initiatives.

Other explanations are also possible. The resistance to converts in the Nasa resguardos of Colombia can be interpreted using Durkheim’s work about socially deviant behavior (1893), as well as “the politics of fear” by Nussbaum (2013) and “the scapegoat mechanism” by Girard (1989). As explained, many contend that conversion to Christianity is a threat to the

preservation of indigenous culture. Some indigenous leaders go even further by claiming that conversion distorts the harmony of the universe and leads to environmental disasters. A similar accusation, still common in Cuba, that religious people are ‘foreign agents’ that seek to destabilize the country, provides yet another illustration of Durkheim’s theory.

In northeast Mexico, the vulnerability of commitment to justice (Nussbaum 1986) can be most clearly observed, with the drug cartels attacking any person who, motivated by their religious convictions, engages in social work which it considers a threat to their influence. Similar dynamics can be observed in Cuba, but this time it is the government who wants to preserve its ideological influence over society. Although Nussbaum focuses primarily on the level of the individual, my case studies provide a macro level application of her theory. This does not apply to religiously inspired people only but could also apply to social workers, human rights activists or journalists who do not have a religious motivation.

Finally, the fourth building block concerns the analytical value of the notion of spheres of society that has a potential for broader applications. Although I used this concept to gauge violations of religious freedom (Petri & Visscher 2015), it could also be used as an analytical tool to observe social phenomena such as democratic backsliding (Glasius 2018) or the degree of respect for particular fundamental rights such as freedom of expression in distinct spheres of society. Observing a social phenomenon by different spheres of society allows for a more fine-grained manner than through the classic categories of ‘state’ and ‘civil society.’ It also permits overcoming approaches that only consider individual freedoms. The separation of spheres can be considered as a normative addendum to the separation of powers, because the respect for the autonomy of each sphere constitutes a safeguard against “authoritarian and illiberal practices” to cite Glasius (2018), which can be understood as illegitimate interventions of the government in the various private spheres restricting their freedom.

8.4.2 Improvements to Religious Freedom Assessment Tools

This dissertation could inspire changes to the methodologies of the RFATs that can easily be implemented so that these can expand their scope. After all, qualitative research has always produced insights that have informed the development of quantitative tools. By doing this, the RFATs would still be subject to the limitations that characterize quantitative analysis in general, but they could cast their net a little wider by measuring other variables that can be compared in a large n-format.

In this section I discuss some possible improvements to RFATs. (I deal with broader applications of the RM-VAT in section 8.5.2.) First of all, the RFATs could be improved by developing variables that describe overlooked aspects that the RM-VAT revealed such as the multidimensionality of religious freedom, notably religious freedom violations that occur in spheres of society other than the church sphere. This can be done by creating more variables that constitute proxies for each of the spheres. To some degree, the World Watch List of Open Doors International already does this, because it has elaborated a list of questions for five “spheres of life” (private, family, community, national and church spheres), but it does not specifically consider the social sphere nor the business sphere. The RAS Project covers elements of some spheres, but could also be expanded. Particular attention should be given to variables describing subjective elements such as fear, frustration or discouragement. RFATs could also be a bit more flexible in their data collection process by broadening the number of sources they use, which, particularly in the case of the Pew Research Center, is reduced.

RFATs could take the role of non-state actors in restricting religious freedom more into account. The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) by the Pew Research Center and the societal module of the Religion and State Project already do so but these indicators could be ‘unpacked’ to a larger extent. To account for subnational variation, RFATs could be applied below the national state, in line with the broader trend of discovery of the subnational dimension (for example, the V-Dem project takes the subnational level as unit of analysis to compare quality of democracy). Most RFATs state in their methodologies that they take relevant subnational factors into consideration, but only in few instances do they take the subnational level as their unit of analysis. Apart from some pilots by the WWL and the RAS Project, this has not been done systematically.

Another major blind spot in most RFATs that I discussed in this research is that they insufficiently account for behavioral characteristics of religion. In order to address this issue, RFATs could develop more variables that describe forms of semi-active and active religious behavior. Alternatively, it would be helpful if more survey data about such variables is produced. In two 2018 reports, the Pew Research Center stresses the sociological relevance of making the distinction between religious identification and religious behavior in a Western context (2018). In Mexico, the RIFREM survey is a useful source of information about semi-active forms of religious behavior, but lacks questions about more active forms. A practical problem with existing surveys that needs to be addressed is that it cannot be determined to what extent active forms of religious behavior, of which only few measurements exist and often only at the national level (an exception is the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University that collects data at the state and municipal levels), are a consequence of religious convictions or not.

8.4.3 Developing human security

Human security has lost some of its appeal in recent years, in part due to its perceived conceptual vagueness, as explained in section 3.2. Human security remains, however, a very useful lens to observe social phenomena, as is illustrated by this dissertation. Indeed, legal or traditional political science analyses that focus on the state fall short in understanding religious freedom violations in Latin America, which are better understood through the human security perspective, in particular its shift toward a non-traditional approach of security and its subjects (Glasius 2008). In the following I highlight three aspects that could serve to develop this important theoretical concept.

The first aspect concerns the operationalization of human security. As I argued in section 3.2, human security is in itself only a paradigm-shifting concept. However valuable, it needs to be operationalized through the notion of vulnerability so that it can be measured or observed (Owen 2003). In this dissertation I specifically looked at the vulnerability of religious minorities, but the applications of vulnerability assessment tools are much broader, for example political, ethnic, gender or sexual minorities.

As a tool, the RM-VAT is centered on religion through its focus on threats to religious expression in different spheres of life and the coping mechanisms that are specifically related to religion, which makes it difficult to apply it to non-religious groups. Moreover, the behavioral component of the RM-VAT is absent from ethnicity, gender and sexual preference, which are identity categories. The threats that specific professions face, such as journalists or

human rights activists, for example those that promote identity rights and the ones that are ideologically driven, most of the time express themselves in just one sphere of society. This being said, the principles that undergird the RM-VAT, such as the open-minded observation of human security threats and the subject-oriented approach, are applicable to all types of minorities. To properly observe the vulnerability of non-religious minorities it would make more sense, however, to return to the original VAT methodology of which I gave some examples in chapter 3 (Alwang, Siegel & Jorgensen 2001; Owen 2003; Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon 2004; Makoka & Kaplan 2005; OHCHR 2010).

A second aspect that could inspire VATs is the methodological innovation of the specificity assessment which consists in adopting a sliding scale instead of the implicit binary approach to specificity that many seem to follow. Thanks to this sliding scale, I was able to determine degrees of specificity rather than discarding threats that for an arbitrary reason are not deemed specific enough to be considered. It is important to stress the importance of carrying out the specificity assessment after the threat assessment and not before. I systematically carried out both the interpretation and the determination of the specificity of the human security threats a posteriori, i.e. after their observation. If I would have done this a priori, I would have risked discarding human security threats based on a precipitated understanding that they were either “not specific enough” or “not religious persecution”, hereby falling into the same trap as RFATs and other analyses of civil conflicts. The a posteriori determination of specificity also allows the RM-VAT to cast its net wider than other tools, because more threats are considered.

A final aspect that could inspire VATs regards the resilience assessment, which builds on the notions that vulnerable people have agency and that vulnerability can be a form of resilience (Brown 2012; Butler 2016). In most VATs, resilience is not considered (for example in Owen 2003). Analyzing resilience together with vulnerability is relevant to inform strategies to deal with human security threats. Considering vulnerability and resilience together is also necessary to properly gauge vulnerability. A mistake that is often made is to conclude that a particular group is not vulnerable because it is resilient, which would be an error of judgement: the fact that a group is resilient means it is coping well with threats, but it does not mean there are no threats.

Resilience has received increased scholarly attention (Hoogeveen, Tesliuc, Vakis & Dercon 2004; Glasius 2012; Rodin 2014), but, just like the concept of human security, it requires an operationalization so that it can be gauged. In order to do this, following a multidisciplinary approach inspired by various authors (Thielicke 1969; Grix 2000; Arendt 2006 [1963]; Habermas 2006; Glasius 2012; Wellman 2012; Philpott & Shah 2018), I elaborated a categorization of eight coping mechanisms to observe the resilience of the vulnerable religious minorities: ‘avoidance’, ‘spiritual endurance’, ‘compliance’, ‘social wisdom’, ‘moral standing’, ‘solidarity’, ‘collective action’ and ‘taking up arms.’ With the exception of ‘spiritual endurance’ and perhaps ‘moral standing’ which would require to be substituted, these coping mechanisms can be used to identify the coping mechanisms of non-religious minorities.

Another contribution in the field of resilience is the improved understanding of the relation between social engagement – whether inspired by religious convictions or not –, vulnerability and resilience. On the one hand, in my case studies I could observe the central point Nussbaum makes in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) that people who wish to be good are indeed at a higher risk of being shattered by the world; the threats that result from active religious behavior confirm this. I also observed that vulnerability increases unnecessarily when people wish to be ‘too good’ and avoid any form of self-defense, because that makes them an easy prey for

assaults, which became apparent in the examples of churches and businesses in northeast Mexico who sometimes refrain from engaging private security to protect themselves. On the other hand, trying to be good and engaging social injustice seems to be a moral imperative as well as a practical necessity in dangerous contexts. As I also observed, it is often the lack of social engagement – underdeveloped coping mechanisms ‘solidarity’ and ‘collective action’ – that increases vulnerability. Yet, too much social engagement, undertaken to mitigate vulnerability, at times seems to increase it, because it attracts unwanted attention from the government in the case of Cuba and from the drug cartels in the case of northeast Mexico.

8.5 Exploration of possible areas for future research

In this exploration of possible areas for future research, I consecutively discuss areas for future research that arise from the case studies (8.5.1), broader applications of the RM-VAT (8.5.2) and areas for development of the RM-VAT (8.5.3). I focus primarily on the insights I gained from the threat, specificity and resilience assessments of my three cases. I deal with the practical recommendations that come forth from the resilience assessments in the next section.

8.5.1 Areas for future research that arise from the case studies

A general and perhaps expected area of future research that arises from the case studies is the relation between religion and human security. In this dissertation, I have only explored a small portion of this vast area by studying the human security (specific vulnerability and resilience) of religious minorities, without getting close to exhausting this topic. More research is needed in two related areas: the role of some religious actors to promote conflict and the role religious actors can play in conflict resolution and in promoting human security (Johnston & Sampson 1994; Appleby 2000; Mwaura 2008; Wellman & Lombardi 2012; Grim 2016; Baumgart-Ochse, Glaab, Smith & Smythe 2017). Because it remains largely understudied, a specific emphasis deserves to be placed on the subnational dimension of human security (Owen 2003; Dabène 2008; Glasius e.a. 2018), in particular in studying how subnational undemocratic regimes interplay with religion and religious freedom, which empirical relevance is stressed by my first two case studies. In line with the “shifting security” feature of human security and the findings of my case studies, I also recommend taking a different approach to the state and its enforcement of religious policy, particularly considering the increasingly blurred lines between authoritarianism and democracy as analytical categories (Dabène, Geisser & Massardier 2008; Glasius 2018).

A more specific area of future research concerns the relation between organized crime and religion. In my case study on northeast Mexico I found that the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians is to a large degree the result of the fact that their behavior disturbs the interest of the drug cartels. This finding defies the conventional understanding that organized crime is not concerned with religion; my first case study suggests that it can be and most of the time for non-religious motives which could be labelled as ‘greed.’ It would be interesting to explore to what extent this conclusion applies to similar contexts such as other crime torn regions of Mexico, the gang violence in Central American countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras, the guerrilla wars in rural Colombia, the violence in Brazilian favelas and drug-related conflicts in the Caribbean region. Beyond Latin America, one could think of the organized crime in sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan or even in the inner cities of the United States.

Going even further, as I already hinted to above, organized crime, when it takes over traditional functions of the state through infiltration or co-optation at the subnational level like I observed in my first case study, effectively regulates religion in similar ways to states in non-democracies, including Islamist regimes and communist regimes (Koesel 2014; Cesari 2014; Sarkissian 2015; Fox 2016; Philpott 2019). Understanding these dynamics more in-depth would constitute an excellent avenue for future research.

In my case study on the Nasa *resguardos* in Colombia, a central finding was that the far-reaching indigenous self-government rights, although positive on paper, lead to the risk of human rights abuses, including violations of religious freedom. Research by Ghanea & Xanthaki (2005), Kymlicka (1996), Scolnicov (2011) and Pinto (2015) suggests that the issues posed by the imbalance between individual and collective rights in indigenous communities are widespread, affecting not only religious minorities but also other types of minorities such as gender, sexual and political minorities. Yet, minority-within-the-minority or intra-ethnic conflicts receive relatively little attention in legal scholarship and in conflict studies. Further research into how to solve the puzzle of imbalanced rights that is respectful of collective cultural rights and minority rights is therefore highly relevant. Cases that come to mind are other Latin American countries (other indigenous territories in Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil) (Nieto Martinez 2005; Kovic 2007; Lopera Mesa 2009; Duarte 2009; Scolnicov 2011; Zegarra-Ballón 2015; Freston 2018) and worldwide (Canada, United States, Israel, Australia, South Asian countries, New Zealand). Examples of discussions of minority-within-the-minority cases are Kymlicka (1996) (Canada and United States), McDonald (1998) (Australia and Canada), Pfaff-Czarnecka (2010) (South Asia), Jobani & Perez (2014) (Israel) and Pinto (2015) (Israel and Canada). Findings could further be generalized to religious conflicts within diaspora communities.

A related point concerns the exploration of models for the accommodation of differences in polities with deep societal cleavages (Gurr 1993; Kymlicka 1996; Lijphart 2004; Vargas & Petri 2009; Achterhuis & Koning 2017), as is evidently the case in the Nasa community, and the legal precedent of “reasonable accommodation” which “acknowledges that there are plural thoughts on [...] issues and should be accommodated when reasonable” (Du Plessis 2014:105). A possible solution to the religious conflict I described in my case study could be that cultural dissidents accept the political authority of the indigenous leaders, but that they are given the possibility to opt out of those social activities they cannot take part in because of their religion, like the mandatory religion classes in indigenous schools.

A solution in the field of education could be to implement a system in which traditional indigenous education and confessional education are both funded by the Colombian state, inspired by the Dutch educational system since 1917 which came into being as a solution to the *schoolstrijd* [*school struggle*] in The Netherlands (1848-1917). Initially, the conflict revolved around freedom of education, with confessional groups demanding the legal possibility to create private confessional schools, a right that was included in the 1848 Constitution. Considering the high costs for establishing and maintaining confessional schools, anti-revolutionary politicians Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (2008 [1847]) and Abraham Kuyper (1880, 1898) then advocated for the public financing of confessional education, which was granted after a long struggle, through a series of political reforms referred to as ‘the Pacification’ that were adopted in 1917. This led to a unique system in which the state funds all schools equally, both secular and confessional, with some degree of autonomy to establish

policies regarding curriculum and teacher appointments (Hooker 2009), while the state maintains general educational standards applicable to all (Du Plessis 2014).

The Dutch model in which religious schools are publicly funded remains controversial and continues to be opposed on ideological grounds by various (secular) political parties. Interestingly, most RFATs (GRI and RAS) view the Dutch educational system as a form of state favoritism of religion, which is ironic, because most religious groups view it as a major advance in terms of religious freedom. Buijs specifically cites the Dutch educational system as an expression of pluralism (2013), with the caveat that it should not lead to “religious segregation” but “provide a platform for encountering other religions and cultures” (Buijs, Sunier & Versteeg 2013:12-13). At any rate, this model allowed to peacefully accommodate major political differences of religious and non-religious groups. It could be interesting to explore a similar solution for the cultural dissidents in the Nasa community.

The religious policies of communist and post-totalitarian regimes, although they have received substantial attention (Koesel 2014; Sarkissian 2015; Fox 2015; Philpott 2019), deserve ongoing study. Flowing from my case study on Cuba, I noted that the evolution over time of the religious policy in this country is insufficiently understood, particularly the way in which informal and often unreported government practices restrict religious freedom. As Koesel notes: “There are few comparative studies of religion and politics in countries undergoing transitions from communism – or for that matter from other forms of authoritarian rule.” (2014:175). This is not only relevant for Cuba but also to interpret religious policy in other countries in the region that apply elements from “the authoritarian toolkit” to repress religion, as Koesel calls it. In Latin America, Venezuela appears to be implementing similar measures in terms of restricting religious freedom, inspired by the communist model. Other communist countries such as North Korea or communist countries in transition, such as China and Vietnam, could also be considered. Beyond the communist world, the case study could be generalizable to other authoritarian / post-totalitarian regimes, like for example in Central Asia or the Middle-East, as well as to governments who formally or informally propagate a state religion. In addition, studies about post-totalitarian regimes should give more attention to coping strategies of religious minorities as the ones I observed in Cuba or the ones observed by Grix in East-Germany (2000) and Koesel in China (2014).

8.5.2 Broader applications of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool

The RM-VAT is essentially a tool to organize data on human security threats and coping mechanisms which could theoretically be applied to any political-institutional context. The varied nature of the political-institutional contexts of the three case studies included in this dissertation points to the broad possibilities for the application of the RM-VAT. Indeed, in terms of units of analysis (subnational / national), human security setting (organized crime, indigenous conflict and communist authoritarianism), geography (urban / rural), type of persecution (horizontal / vertical), social cleavage (ethnic / non-ethnic) the possibilities seem endless. The possibility that the tool can be applied to other contexts, however, does not mean it will necessarily yield substantial new empirical knowledge. A more pertinent approach, therefore, is to determine under which parameters the RM-VAT could improve the observation of vulnerability of religious minorities.

Although the three case studies included in this study concern Latin American countries and Christian groups, the RM-VAT can be used to study religious minorities belonging to other

regions and other religions. As I already pointed out when I discussed the potential for generalization of each of the case studies, the RM-VAT can be applied to observe the position of religious minorities in similar contexts in other regions. Since I applied the RM-VAT to such different groups in my case studies, it can be assumed that it can be applied to vulnerable non-Christian religious minorities as well.

In addition, I would like to observe that a reflection about vulnerability and coping mechanisms also exists in other religions – I gave examples of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in chapter 2 – and some of the assumptions of the RM-VAT are based on the work of scholars who are rooted in different religious confessions: Baha’i, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and even atheists. Most analytical concepts that are part of the RM-VAT, such as the continuum of religious identity and behavior, apply to all religions. Although it is rooted in Reformed political philosophy, in this dissertation I used the concept of ‘sphere sovereignty’ (spheres of society) as an analytical category to describe the multidimensionality of religious freedom – which is nothing more than an extension of the principle of separation between religion and state to other spheres – and not as a normative concept. The only required adaptation would be to change the name of the church sphere to the corresponding religious institution (Petri & Visscher 2015).

The added value of the application of the RM-VAT is likely to be higher when it concerns cases in which religious minorities display active forms of religious behavior, at the subnational level, in contexts affected by high human insecurity, with threats outside the church sphere (or its equivalent for other religions: the mosque sphere, the synagogue sphere, the temple sphere, etc.), and when the analysis of coping mechanisms is analytically relevant. Within these parameters, the RM-VAT can be applied beyond Latin America and to non-Christian religious minorities such as Sufis or Baha’i in Iran, Salafists in Egypt, Rohingya in Myanmar, Muslims in India or Jews in the Middle East or in Europe. (In the case of non-missionary religions such as Judaism, the category ‘missionary activity’ is not applicable.) It can also be applied to observe the vulnerability of religious groups to organized crime in countries like Nigeria, the issues posed by conversion in indigenous communities in Australia and the repression of minority religions in Indonesia.

Atheists constitute an exceptional group because they do not technically qualify as a religion, but they can share a number of characteristics with religious people insofar their worldview inspires certain forms of individual or collective behavior – ‘class consciousness’ is not necessary; this was also absent in the case of actively practicing Christians in northeast Mexico –, like humanist groups, although it may be a challenge to identify them if they do not organize in groups. In Iran and other Islamic countries, atheists are persecuted in similar ways as religious minorities, about which there is little awareness.³²⁹

8.5.3 Development of the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool

In light of the case studies, there are a number of avenues that could be explored to improve the RM-VAT. A limitation of the tool that I already mentioned is the determination of the scope of the human security threats it observes. As I explained, threats can be observed with a certain degree of certainty, but it is not possible, because of limited data availability in the cases I studied, to determine how widespread or representative they are. Taking on the challenge

³²⁹ “Atheists around world suffer persecution, discrimination: report”, *Reuters*, 09/12/2012.

formulated by Douglas W. Hubbard in *How to Measure Anything. Finding the Value of "Intangibles" in Business* (2014), it should in fact be possible to come up with an 'extrapolation method' to predict the scope of the identified human security threats, an intangible, even with limited data. According to Hubbard, the starting point of any measurement problem is to gather what is already known about the subject: one generally has more data and needs less data than one thinks; in my case, the RM-VATs include a wealth of information, including estimates and input from experts. Based on an assessment of all available data it can be determined which variables require additional measurement. A sufficient amount of new data – to reduce uncertainty and yield information value – is often more accessible than one thinks, as Hubbard asserts.

A related point is the determination of what can be referred to as 'comparative intensity', i.e. the comparison of the intensity of human security threats between religious minorities and other groups. As I discussed above, the determination of the specificity of these threats is possible up to a degree, but in order to be able to compare the intensity and be able to determine whether, for example, Christians in Cuba suffer more or less from certain threats than political dissidents, data describing the scope of the human security threats is necessary. In order to overcome this limitation, the adoption of a statistical probabilities method, as used by Bartman to reach the conclusion that "[in Mexico] journalists are at a much higher risk of being murdered than the general population" (2018:1093), could be explored.

Not only the intensity of human security threats could be compared between different groups, this could also be done for coping mechanisms. For example, in the same study, Bartman found that solidarity among critical journalists in Mexico is very important, which contrasts with my finding that solidarity among actively practicing Christians in NL, TS and SP is largely lacking.

Beyond quantitative extrapolations of the RM-VAT to determine scope and comparative intensity, improvements can also be made to simplify the conduct of the fieldwork and the data collection process in general. Provided the right survey data becomes available, particularly more measurements of behavioral aspects of religion – "lived religion", to use Hall's concept (1997) – that can be crossed with human security threats and perceptions about these threats, the identification of human security threats could be more expedited because the need for extensive fieldwork would be reduced. The risk of such an approach is that one loses the inductive and context-sensitive features of the RM-VAT, but because the threat assessment is less labor intensive, more cases could be analyzed.

Simplifications can also be made to the threat assessment itself at the level of the observed spheres of society, merging certain spheres or by focusing exclusively on one sphere or sub-sphere. Merging spheres would reduce the number of categories of interpretation but would make it easier to apply the threat assessment to holistic contexts like the Nasa where the borders between spheres are not watertight. Focusing on specific spheres could be relevant if one wants to deepen the understanding of the intricacies of a particular topic such as freedom of education, conscientious objection or surveillance in relation to religious freedom, although one risks losing the inductive qualities of the RM-VAT to assess religious freedom violations throughout all spheres of society.

For the case study on the vulnerability of Christians in Cuba I had the opportunity to conduct a focus group session with a number of Christian leaders, which allowed me to obtain their feedback on the threats I had identified and to facilitate a reflection about coping mechanisms. Beyond its use to improve the quality of the threat and resilience assessments, the focus group

session was also instrumental to increase the awareness of the participants about the threats they face and triggered a self-reflection about coping mechanisms they experienced as helpful. Because of practical limitations, I was not able to conduct similar focus group sessions in the two other case studies, but ideally making one or more focus group sessions integral to the application of the RM-VAT would be beneficial for data collection.

In the same line of thinking, the resilience assessment could benefit from the world of “scenario planning”, also called scenario thinking or scenario analysis, a strategic method that some organizations use to get to grips with the broader contextual uncertainties when making strategic or major investment decisions based on a better understanding of the complexity of the future business environment. This method was pioneered for application in business by Royal Dutch Shell in the 1970s. The scenario narratives that result from such exercises may be referred to as “memories of the future”, providing a meaningful framework for discussing the key trends in the contextual environment and their implications for business decisions (Krijnen 2017). This method could also be applied to gain a better understanding of the vulnerability of religious minorities and gain insights into the coping mechanisms they could adopt in response to the future environment, especially if representatives of the observed vulnerable religious minority are involved in the process.

8.6 Implications for religious minorities, faith-based organizations and human rights agencies

A number of implications for three groups can be formulated based on this research: religious minorities, faith-based organizations implementing relief projects to victims of religious persecution and human rights agencies (whether public institutions or civil society organizations). Based on the findings of my case studies, I first offer some general comments on intervention strategies to support vulnerable religious minorities and develop their resilience (8.6.1). I then discuss three fields that can be generalized from the information I collected in my case studies: the role religious groups could play to mitigate the impact of organized crime (8.6.2), policy recommendations to address minority-within-the-minority conflicts (8.6.3) and recommendations for religious minorities in authoritarian regimes (8.6.4).

8.6.1 Comments on intervention strategies to develop the resilience of vulnerable religious minorities

When reflecting about coping mechanisms against human security threats that religious minorities can adopt, the controversial point, made by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (2006 [1963]) that Jewish leaders may not have done enough to prevent the Holocaust is worth mentioning: “The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and fearless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people” (1963:125). Although Arendt was severely criticized for this statement by many who alleged that she was ‘blaming the victims’ of the Holocaust, this was not at all what she meant. The Nazis (and the silent collaborating majority) were evidently guilty of the Holocaust, and Arendt recognizes that it would have been insensitive to expect the Jewish leaders to have resisted the Final Solution because of fear, ignorance of the Nazi projects and the, in retrospect, naïve expectation that cooperation with the Nazis could have mitigated the harm to the Jews (Elon 2006). This being said, in her book Arendt cites the

courageous examples of the Danish population and Dutch Jewish leaders who on moral grounds resisted the implementation of the Final Solution, which had some impact on the attitude of Nazi officials.

Raise awareness about human security threats that are faced by religious minorities

Two recommendations for vulnerable religious minorities and for organizations wishing to help them can be inferred from Arendt's reflection about the Holocaust. The first is the need to raise awareness about the human security threats that are faced by religious minorities, like the desperate attempts of SS officer Kurt Gerstein, the protagonist of Rolf Hochhuth's play *Der Stellvertreter. Ein christliches Trauerspiel* [*The Deputy, a Christian tragedy*] (1975 [1963]), portrayed in the 2002 film *Amen*, to get the Vatican to take notice of the Final Solution. The lack of awareness about the Holocaust did not only concern the international community but also the Jewish community itself who was largely ignorant about what was unfolding. In my case studies, I could observe a similar lack of awareness among religious groups. Issues such as the normalization of violence in northeast Mexico and the internalization of the restrictive definition of religious freedom as imposed by the communist regime in Cuba limit the understanding of the broader picture of the human security situation they find themselves in.

Awareness raising thus is an essential intervention priority for faith-based organizations, a responsibility it shares with human rights agencies. In line with the demonstrable specificity of the vulnerability of religious minorities, I conclude that religious freedom constitutes a distinct analytical category and therefore should receive separate attention in human rights monitoring. This must be done in such a way that it takes both the multidimensionality of religious freedom and the behavioral dimension of religion into account, following the human security approach. If the concept of religious freedom is not properly understood, its violations cannot be recognized. Misunderstanding the multidimensionality of religious freedom is worrying from the perspective of the rule of law. In my work for civil society organizations, I have witnessed government officials who have used the argument that a particular human rights violation cannot be qualified as 'religious', which then becomes a justification not to act on it.

As I argued in chapter 3, human rights organizations rarely give attention to religious freedom, or include it under the broad category 'sectarian conflict.' A case in point is the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a body of the Organization of American States, which, as already mentioned, does not have a rapporteur for religious freedom, but has rapporteurs for a wide range of other vulnerable groups, such as indigenous people, women, migrants, journalists (freedom of expression), children, human rights defenders, afro-descendants, LGBTI, etc.

Regarding the documentation of human rights abuses, the overwhelming number of organizations in Latin American civil society, including faith-based organizations, which neglect their responsibility to collect data is noteworthy. Most organizations are generally very good at talking about issues, creating attention-grabbing campaigns on social media, performing social diagnostics, and even making recommendations for public policy, but what they rarely do is the tedious, time-intensive, and sometimes dangerous task of documenting incidents. This is also true for the documentation of incidents of violation of religious freedom. If incidents were properly documented, in human rights monitoring and in RFATs, this research would not have been necessary.

The documentation of incidents is the main justification for requesting attention to a specific social problem or social fact. If religious freedom violations are not documented, it is as if they did not exist. This is fundamental for any attempt at political advocacy:

“Documenting human rights abuses is the heart of human rights work. The effectiveness of human rights as a tool depends on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the evidence gathered. It can contribute to educating and organizing as well as advocating at a political or legal level. Government leaders have been brought down through documentation of human rights violations; the power of the process, both for the victim and the perpetrator, should not be underestimated. Documentation is about collecting stories, establishing truths and “sounding alarms.” Success can depend on one’s ability to access those stories and give meaning to them, for example through showing patterns of abuse.” (Kaplan 2009:25).

Documentation is particularly important in situations in which victims of violence that are too afraid to report crimes to the police – as observed in my three case studies –, or when states fail to comply with the requirement to register human rights violations. To cite just one example, in its report *The Human Rights Situation in Mexico* (2015), the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that “the internal forced displacement has not been documented and analyzed comprehensively by the [Mexican] State, which is the main obstacle facing the comprehensive response that Mexico should give this phenomenon.” The report also observed that the situation “is evidenced by the invisibility of the problem”, which does not allow to “adopt the measures necessary to provide an effective response to this phenomenon.” (p. 134). Therefore, one of the most important purposes of documenting incidents, particularly when they concern human rights violations, is to ensure that a record of specific violations is kept, to hold the responsible party accountable, and demand that its victims are compensated. As a human rights manual states, “Well-handled human rights information is basic to any struggle for justice and peace.” (Burma Issues 1994).

The need to develop and facilitate reflections about coping mechanisms

Furthermore, having a clear picture of the threats to which religious minorities are vulnerable is strategically relevant because it can inform tactics that can contribute to making a religious minority more self-reliant and mitigate the risks it faces, which leads me to the second recommendation: the need to develop and facilitate reflections about coping mechanisms. Reformulating Arendt’s nuanced argument using the concepts of this research, it could be said that the use of coping mechanisms could have mitigated the threat of mass extermination of European Jews at least to a small degree. It falls beyond the scope of this research to discuss Arendt’s argument more extensively, but it provides an opportunity to interrogate the findings of the resilience assessments in my case studies.

In my case studies, I found that coping mechanisms are generally underdeveloped, and, save some noteworthy exceptions, passivity – expressed through avoidance and compliance – seems to be the default response of the majority of the members of the vulnerable religious minorities I studied. This is understandable considering the fear that results from the very real human security threats they face, but an adequate understanding of these threats as well as a careful reflection about how they could be mitigated could nevertheless be very beneficial and overcome the default passive response.

Before discussing which coping mechanisms can be recommended based on the findings of my case studies, it is first of all important to acknowledge how difficult it can be for a great number of Christians in Latin America to even start considering coping mechanisms. Beyond fear of repression, there is a broadly shared sense that resisting the oppressors, whether the drug cartels or the Cuban government, is useless. In my interviews I observed a feeling that publicly addressing issues will not lead to a radical change in society. As a Colombian pastor from Cali puts it, “when evil is so present, it kills all hope for change.”³³⁰

Coping mechanisms are further underdeveloped because of a complex of theological reasons. An insight from psychology about bullying illustrates how moral convictions, which may be rooted in religion, about compassion and a rejection of aggression even when this is necessary for self-protection, can indeed make people vulnerable:

“But just as often, people are bullied because they *won't* fight back. This happens not infrequently to people who are by temperament compassionate and self-sacrificing (...) It also happens to people who have decided, for one reason or another, that all forms of aggression, including even feelings of anger, are morally wrong.” (Peterson 2018:23-24).

In chapter 3 I referred to the predominance of certain theological options that rule out any form of social engagement, particularly in Pentecostal denominations that teach a strict segregation between ‘spiritual’ and ‘earthly’ matters, which also explains an overall limited involvement in the pursuit of social justice and the underdevelopment of coping mechanisms. The following statement by a Guatemalan pastor illustrates this:

“I have worked for years in an area where gangs and organized crime have produced enormous pain and harm to the population. What I have seen is that the Church has not taken a clear and unanimous position on what to do. For this reason, the interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of organized crime are scarce and isolated. Besides fear, the main reason for this is the doctrine of the majority of the churches that separates the spiritual from the material, concluding that the church should not do anything about the issue because it is ‘material.’ I personally do not share this point of view but it is the view of the majority.”³³¹

The generalized passivity of most Christians I interviewed for my case studies can further be explained by a lack of understanding of the concept of resilience itself, which is not surprising considering the combination of reasons that discourage any reflection on social engagement. A logical response to this passivity by faith-based organizations would therefore be to stimulate an active theological reflection about the value of resilience, while at the same time offering practical real-life examples of resilient religious communities, expanding the direction taken by the *Under Caesar's Sword* project (Philpott & Shah 2018). As Jeffrey Stout argues in *Blessed Are the Organized* (2010), grassroots religious groups, if they adopt effective strategies, can exercise real influence over policy and promote social justice. Compiling a manual of best practices of the application of coping mechanisms, similar to Gene Sharp's catalogue of 198 “methods of nonviolent action” (1993), could also serve a didactic purpose.

³³⁰ Interview with Harold Segura (2011).

³³¹ Interview with Mario Larios (2011).

The central importance of social wisdom

Along with the need to raise awareness and to stimulate a reflection about coping mechanisms, the central importance of social wisdom is highlighted in all three case studies. The value of this mechanism resides in the fact that it informs how to best apply all other coping mechanisms, notably solidarity, collective action and taking up arms, and even the formal compliance with regulations even though their spirit is disrespected, as I described in the case study on Cuban Christians. Engaging religious minorities to be solidary with other vulnerable religious minorities in their own country or region can strengthen this.

To be effective, coping mechanisms need to be used strategically. If not, they could have the counterproductive effect of increasing vulnerability instead of reducing it. This is not only a philosophical question but also a practical one. An example that can be mentioned is the international advocacy to support the human rights of Cuban Christians. When its tone is too confrontational and sensitive information is not handled carefully, Cuban Christians complain that it hinders them more than it helps because it triggers more hostility from the government.

In the most extreme cases, it can be considered as a form of social wisdom to remain silent about one's faith, as did the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries to Japan portrayed in *Silence* by Shūsaku Endō (1966). Similarly, in the Bible, Queen Esther stayed silent about her Jewish background for a time for strategic purposes; it allowed her to be instrumental in the salvation of her people later.

The importance of social wisdom is also illustrated by its absence in the case of the cultural dissidents in the Nasa resguardos. Contrary to the general trend I described, there is no lack of collective action among cultural dissidents, but this collective action may be too confrontational and uncompromising, contributing to a worsening of the conflict instead of solving it. The *Under Caesar's Sword* project reminds that "Domestic advocacy is most effective when done quietly and respectfully by Christian leaders who have nurtured relationships with local and national officials" (University of Notre-Dame 2017:48). If the cultural dissidents would move away from their "adversarial logic", and instead adopt a "collaboration logic" (Vargas & Petri 2009) they might have better chances to succeed, without increasing their vulnerability.

This is of course easier said than done and is especially difficult now because of the ongoing antagonism between the cabildos and the cultural dissidents. It is nevertheless a direction that is worth exploring, in line with Habermas' recommendation for religious traditions to undertake the "arduous work of hermeneutic self-reflection" (2006:14). Generalizing, Christian converts should critically analyze the impact and meaning of their religious behavior in their community, as is the essence of Thielicke's *Verantwortungsethik* (1969). The religious rights of individual Christian converts deserve to be respected, but it would be beneficial if they realized that, in their context, a church building is more than just a place of worship, but can also be seen as a symbol of political subversion, as Mexican sociologist José Refugio Arellano argues.³³² Buijs similarly encourages religious groups to "define orthodoxy in such a way that the reflective distance, the wisdom and serenity that is required to live in a non-perfect

³³² Interview with José Refugio Arellano (2016).

world is cultivated. Orthodoxy should be defined and transmitted to next generations as the opposite of radicalism.” (2013:34).

It is also critical for both foreign and indigenous missionaries to understand the need for cultural sensitivity. As José Casanova observes, “Global denominationalism [international Christian missions] would also defend the principle of individual religious freedom, which includes the right to conversion and the attendant right to evangelize, but would recognize that there are both appropriate and inappropriate ways to evangelize” (2008:15). In a similar way, the *Under Caesar’s Sword* project recommends:

“Persecuted churches should avoid giving unnecessary offense and bringing on “avoidable” persecution by adopting (where possible) culturally sensitive measures to avoid community tensions. For example, churches can monitor sound levels during worship, avoid staging events on other religions’ festival days, rely as much as possible on indigenous leadership, and avoid disrespectful public comments about other religions.” (University of Notre-Dame 2017:48).

Synthesis of intervention strategies

The points I made in this section are summarized in the figure 8.1, identifying the shared responsibility of faith-based organizations, human rights agencies and religious minorities themselves to actively and strategically respond to human security threats.

8.1 Synthesis of intervention strategies by religious minorities, faith-based organizations and human rights agencies

| | <i>Religious minorities</i> | <i>Faith-based organizations</i> | <i>Human rights agencies</i> |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Raise awareness about human security threats that are faced by religious minorities | X | X | X |
| Include the multidimensionality of religious freedom in human rights monitoring. | | | X |
| Conscientiously document violations of religious freedom. | X | X | X |
| Develop and facilitate a reflection about coping mechanisms | | X | X |
| Stimulate a theological reflection about the value of resilience. | | X | |
| Compile best practices of the application of coping mechanisms. | X | X | X |
| Acknowledge the central importance of social wisdom | X | X | |
| Engage religious minorities to be solidary with vulnerable religious minorities in their own country or region. | X | X | |
| Facilitate a hermeneutic self-reflection about how to use coping mechanisms strategically. | X | X | |
| Be culturally sensitive. | X | X | |

Source: own elaboration.

Considering the limited resources of faith-based organizations and human rights agencies, it makes sense for them to prioritize on vulnerable communities that have low developed coping mechanisms, rather than on vulnerable communities that already know how to deal with the threats they face, and to focus on developing those coping mechanisms that have been proven to work in other contexts. When groups have a low degree of resilience, interventions are required to develop their resilience. When groups are in a situation of low vulnerability, it still makes sense to deploy interventions aiming at a preparation for possible future threats. No intervention is required when the vulnerable religious group already has a high degree of resilience, but such groups could be encouraged to share their experience with other, less resilient groups.

8.6.2 The role religious groups could play to mitigate the impact of organized crime

Generalizing from the findings of the resilience assessment of the case study on actively practicing Christians in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí, in this section I share a few comments about the role religious groups could play to mitigate the impact of organized crime. This can have a positive impact at three levels: to reduce their own vulnerability, to help other vulnerable groups in line with Braun's hypothesis that religious minorities are generally more inclined and better able to help other threatened minorities (2016), and to make a positive

contribution to society in general. The importance of the latter should not be underestimated. It can be considered a moral imperative, but it also increases resilience by creating goodwill in a community, which will be more likely to protect the religious minority when it is threatened.

Commenting on religious freedom in indigenous communities in Mexico, the US State Department denounces the existence of “poor enforcement mechanisms” and impunity for acts of religious intolerance (2013). This finding is also applicable to the areas under control of organized crime like NL, TS and SP, as well as other crime torn areas in Mexico and beyond (the ‘northern triangle’ of Central America, rural Colombia, Brazilian cities, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, etc.). The general context of lawlessness, impunity and corruption creates the opportunity, to use Collier, Hoeffler & Rohner’s terminology (2009), for criminals to attack vulnerable groups, including religious minorities who display active religious behavior. The inability of the state to guarantee the rule of law is a direct factor of their vulnerability, because the state fails to uphold its duty to protect. In such contexts, it is just too easy to kidnap someone or to raid a church.

In response to this finding, the obvious recommendation to civil society in general is to hold the Mexican state accountable for its duty to protect, and to promote programs that strengthen the state’s capacity at all levels to enforce the law and protect its vulnerable citizens, including religious minorities. Religious minorities should themselves play an active role in this respect, conscientiously documenting incidents and filing police reports – and be trained to do so –, even though this may be risky, and advocate for a better protection of their community. The actively practicing Christians I studied have a lot to gain in this field as the coping mechanisms ‘solidarity’ and ‘collective action’ are underdeveloped.

The Mexican government recognized the role the church and religious institutions can play in promoting social capital in society in a context of organized crime. As a Mexican government official declared: “Churches and religious associations can make an important contribution to rebuilding the social fabric by disseminating a culture of legality and reinforcing principles and values.”³³³ My observation in my case study on northeast Mexico reveals that churches have generally not responded to this call. The notable exception I found is Guadalupe (NL), where church leaders made a significant contribution to instill values in the police department. When religious minorities engage in civic participation, however, this needs to be done in such a way that it does not increase their vulnerability but instead contributes to an effective transformation of social structures. Military offensives are often very destructive and short-lived, whereas religious action could contribute to changes in society which in turn could reduce the appeal and influence of drug cartels.

Small measures can have a large impact. Because visible gatherings of religious groups in churches or other equivalent institutions are directly putting them at risk, safer ways could be explored so that religious services attract less attention of criminal organizations, such as the organization of meetings in smaller groups, preferably in private homes in order to stay under the radar. The house church model, as applied by Cuban Christians is a possible template (I come back to this in section 8.6.4). Increased security checks at the entrance of churches could also be useful, as I observed in Jos, Nigeria in 2014. Following the advice of Israeli security experts, young men stand guard around churches during services to deter any attempt of terrorist attacks, purses and bags are systematically checked at the entrance, and visitors need

³³³ Speech of Paulo Tort Ortega, the Director of the Religious Associations division of the Ministry of the Interior of Mexico at the Seventh World Congress of the International Religious Liberty Association in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic from 24-26 April 2012.

to park 200 meters away from the church building to avoid the threat of car bombs. Because extortion is often related to the perception that religious institutions handle large amounts of money, these would do well to think of ways to be less conspicuous in their fundraising and avoid cash offerings. Such measures will not solve the problems but could reduce the vulnerability of this religious minority to some of the threats.

8.6.3 Policy recommendations to address minority-within-the-minority conflicts

Based on my case study on the cultural dissidents in the southwestern highlands of Colombia, in this section I give a few policy recommendations that can be used to address similar minority-within-the-minority conflicts. A priori, there is no necessary conflict between external protections of indigenous communities and individual rights of group members as Kymlicka (1996; 2001) and McDonald (1998) assert, but such conflicts are to some degree inevitable “in the real world”, as the Nasa resguardos illustrate. In *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (1996), Kymlicka advocates for the broadest possible endorsement of “group-differentiated rights” for ethnic minorities but cites two limitations to this endorsement: (a) restrictions of the basic civic and political rights of its members and (b) rights that enable one group to oppress or exploit other groups. In other words, Kymlicka is favorable to maximize tolerance of all facets of minority culture as long as it does not contradict the non-negotiable principle of internal autonomy.

Kymlicka’s normative stance seems reasonable, but its application is challenging. Imposing it by coercion is obviously problematic. Recognizing this challenge, he explores some possible solutions. The first is to seek a negotiated agreement on fundamental principles. The government, or in its default, civil society organizations, should facilitate serious mediation efforts between indigenous leaders and cultural dissidents, although this is evidently easier said than done. In the Nasa resguardos there is evidently a lot of incomprehension between the different parties that could perhaps be amended through conflict resolution. In order for this to happen, however, there needs to be political will on both sides to dialogue, and a broadly shared recognition that the principle of self-determination also has an internal dimension, which cannot be used to commit any human rights abuses (Jones 1999).

The rejection of religious freedom, or of any other human right for that matter, by appealing to traditional culture is nonsensical, as Martha Nussbaum stresses. In *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000), she confronts the frequently heard charge that the language of justice and human rights is a form of Western and colonial imposition that is incompatible with the norms of traditional cultures. Referring to the matter of discrimination of women, her reflection can also be useful to address minority-within-the-minority conflicts in general. Among other things, Nussbaum argues that using the notion of tradition to resist human rights is not only self-serving but also too simplistic, because it foregoes the fact that cultures are dynamic and are “scenes of debate and contestation”, which include dominant voices but also voices of women (and, by extension, any vulnerable group) “which have not always been heard.” In other words, if one wishes to appeal to tradition, one must also be willing to listen to the non-dominant voices that are also part of tradition (2000:225). In a similar vein, Toft argues that because “the human rights regime has undergone a systematic diffusion across the world” it is not only incorrect to present it as a Western imposition but also is a “denial of agency” of vulnerable communities (2016).

Any negotiated agreement or legal solution to the complex issue of minority rights faces the challenge of its enforcement, above all in contexts where there is no political will or state capacity to apply the rule of law, such as in remote rural areas of Colombia. An international tribunal, for example, can order the rights of religious minorities to be respected, but this will be meaningless if the orders are not enforced, as frequently occurs with such rulings in rural Mexico (Dabène 2008; Petri 2019). I have personally witnessed this in religious conflicts in indigenous communities in the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Jalisco (Mexico). Negotiated agreements were not enforced, in part due to the remoteness of these communities.

The second solution Kymlicka proposes is for the state to offer incentives for liberal reforms inside indigenous communities. There are antecedents of successful progressive lobbies in other indigenous communities that could be a source of inspiration. Cleary's research on changes in women's political rights in indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca in Mexico revealed that the formalization of indigenous autonomy, which was previously used to restrict the right of women to vote and to stand for election, created space for liberal activists to expand female political participation (2017). This example is interesting not only because it shows it is possible to advance human rights in indigenous communities without renouncing indigenous self-determination, but also because it hints at a path that cultural dissidents could follow, namely to lobby for the formalization (turning into positive law) of the indigenous self-government institutions which are now largely based on customary and oral legislation. This would reduce the large degree of arbitrariness in which core legal principles such as due process risk being disregarded, a point that is repeatedly stressed by the human rights commissions at the state level in Mexico.³³⁴

For this solution to be effective, however, members of indigenous communities who disagree with their authorities must not feel encouraged to leave, because otherwise the incentive for internal democratization weakens. As Hirschman observes, based on Walzer, "the greater the opportunities for exit, the easier it appears to be for organizations to resist, evade, and postpone the introduction of internal democracy even though they function in a democratic environment." (1970:84).

The third solution is to strengthen international mechanisms for protecting human rights. Kymlicka argues that indigenous groups are generally more willing to submit to the judicial review of international tribunals than to constitutional courts which enforce the constitution of their conquerors. The paradoxical situation in the case of Colombia is that the Constitutional Court has categorically defended the autonomy of the *resguardos indígenas*, at the expense of the individual (religious) rights of its members. The obvious international mechanism cultural dissidents would turn to is the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), but it would remain to be seen how this institution would address the conflict between individual and collective rights, or whether it would confirm the jurisprudence of the Colombian Constitutional Court. Based on a review of jurisprudence, I found that the IACHR has never directly addressed the issue of minority rights (including rights of religious minorities) in indigenous communities. So far, it has only received cases that were related to the external dimension of self-determination (2015). Also, it is noteworthy that it has a rapporteur on indigenous rights but not one on religious freedom as I already mentioned.

Whether through the IAHR or some other institutional arrangement, the present imbalance of the Colombian legal system needs to be addressed. As stated earlier, the right to self-

³³⁴ Interview with Eduardo Sosa Márquez (2016).

determination of indigenous groups needs to be balanced with the protection of the human rights of minorities, including religious minorities, living in the *resguardos indígenas*. To paraphrase Kymlicka, the respect of the cultural rights of indigenous groups are only acceptable if they protect the freedom of individuals within the group (2001:20-23). This calls for active lobbying at both national and multicultural institutions in order to ensure the full enforcement of art. 8-2 of ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (1989), namely the principle that the preservation of indigenous customs and institutions cannot contradict fundamental rights, and that conflict resolution procedures must be established to solve any unbalance between them:

“These peoples shall have the right to retain their own customs and institutions, where these are not incompatible with fundamental rights defined by the national legal system and with internationally recognised human rights. Procedures shall be established, whenever necessary, to resolve conflicts which may arise in the application of this principle.”

Kymlicka accepts that “intervention is justified in the case of gross and systematic violation of human rights, such as slavery or genocide or mass torture and expulsions” (2001:170). Based on the evidence presented in chapter 6, one could argue some form of intervention could already be justified, but the Colombian Constitutional Court has systematically ruled otherwise or declared not to entertain jurisdiction over cases involving indigenous peoples.

McDonald (1998) warns against searching for a general theory to solve conflicts between rights. In his view, such conflicts are way too complex for a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, he recommends a contextualized approach that takes the identification of the interests that underpin the conflicting collective and individual rights as its starting point. Such an approach could for example take into consideration elements that are important to the *cabildos* such as the money transfers of the Colombian government to the *resguardos* and the (legitimate) concerns for the preservation of their culture as well as elements that are important to the cultural dissidents such as the possibility to hold church services and to opt-out of the aspects of the indigenous traditional education they consider as witchcraft. A contextualized approach may provide an alternative solution to accommodate conflicting interests than the current jurisprudence regarding indigenous *resguardos* that only offers two options for cultural dissidents: either they accept the political authority and the rulings of the *cabildos*, or they leave the *resguardo*.

8.6.4 Recommendations for religious minorities in authoritarian regimes

The resourcefulness and overall resilience of Cuban Christians, and of all Cubans for that matter, can only be qualified as remarkable. The capacity of the Cuban churches to not only survive, but also to grow amid surrounding hostility is unique. This being said, the degree to which Cuban Christians have internalized and even embraced the restrictive concept of religious freedom imposed by the communist regime, as previously described, is in my view a limiting factor of their resilience. Indeed, by accepting restrictions on religious freedom as normal, Cuban Christians implicitly renounce any aspiration to change this situation. Assuming this is a general trend in most authoritarian regimes, it is therefore essential that faith-based NGO's focus much more on building awareness about what the concept of religious freedom actually entails through capacity building workshops for vulnerable religious groups. This must also inform the way human rights advocacy at multilateral bodies is done. As already stressed,

it could be worthwhile to facilitate more collective self-reflection about coping mechanisms through focus group discussions as I did with a group of Cuban Christian leaders, because it can have a direct effect on the resilience of this vulnerable group.

Although increased self-awareness can be very beneficial to the resilience of religious minorities, it must not come at the expense of their social wisdom. As can be inferred from the case study on the cultural dissidents in the Nasa resguardos, their often aggressive militancy for religious rights exacerbated the conflict, leading to more repression. Therefore any form of increased self-awareness about human rights should be accompanied by a warning to maintain social wisdom.

In addition, I believe it would be beneficial for Cuban Christians to work toward decreasing its dependency on foreign aid, by actively taking advantage of the growing opportunities to start small businesses, while always taking care of staying under the radar. Although restrictions persist, the possibilities for conducting humanitarian work in Cuba have been broadened. Taking advantage of this opportunity would not only provide income to finance the operations of their churches but would also decrease the risk of financial sanctions from the Cuban authorities (such as the fact that religious ministers are not entitled to a state pension) while at the same time reducing the influence of international faith-based organizations in internal church affairs.

More generally, religious groups would do well to recognize the benefits of humanitarian work as a source of resilience. Engaging in humanitarian work, provided it is done carefully, could be a valid strategy to generate goodwill with the authorities and with local communities, which in turn could provide some protection for Christians based on the recognition of their altruistic work. I observed this mechanism at work in Caracas, Venezuela, in 2013. When the government wanted to clamp down on private Catholic schools for ideological reasons, in a particular neighborhood, the community stood up for it and managed to reverse the government's decision because the Catholic Church was doing so much good in terms of social work.³³⁵ It would also help to “counter false stereotypes of being ‘fifth columns’ or agents of the West”, as the *Under Caesar's Sword* project stresses (University of Notre-Dame 2017:48).

Vulnerable religious groups all over the world should embrace the value of the “house church model”, as is used perforce by Cuban Christians, Chinese Christians, etc. Many seem to consider house churches as something that was imposed by the fact that the communist regime would not allow new churches to be built. Although this is how they originated, house churches also provide benefits in terms of organizational capacity, as Koesel explains, which should not be underestimated (2014). The house church model could for example be a source of inspiration for cultural dissidents in Nasa resguardos, because it would allow them to avoid drawing unwanted attention, while continuing to meet to celebrate church services.

Finally, strengthening inter-religious unity can be an important avenue to enhance resilience. Speaking with one voice when dealing with the authorities, sharing resources and advocating for the same causes could potentially strengthen the position of religious minorities and give them more scope to protect their interests.

³³⁵ Interviews with Samuel Olson and José Rodríguez (2013).