IIRF Reports

Dennis P. Petri and Marlies Glasius

Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico

2023/17

International Institute
for Religious Freedom

IIRF International Institute for Religious Freedom

Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
Instituto Internacional para la Libertad Religiosa

El Instituto Internacional para la Libertad (IIRF) se fundó en 2007 con la misión de promover la libertad religiosa para todas las confesiones desde una perspectiva académica. El IIRF aspira a ser una voz autorizada en materia de libertad religiosa. Proporcionamos datos fiables e imparciales sobre la libertad religiosa – más allá de la evidencia anecdótica – para reforzar la investigación académica sobre el tema e informar las políticas públicas a todos los niveles. Los resultados de nuestras investigaciones se difunden a través de la International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF) y otras publicaciones. El IIRF hace especial hincapié en fomentar el estudio de la libertad religiosa en las instituciones universitarias mediante su inclusión en los planes de estudios y el apoyo a los estudiantes de posgrado con proyectos de investigación. El IIRF tiene una presencia global con socios académicos y defensores en todos los continentes. Realizamos investigaciones originales y en colaboración con nuestros socios. El IIRF es también un "lugar de encuentro" para todos los académicos que se interesan por la libertad religiosa. Entendemos la Libertad de Religión y Creencias (LRyC) como un derecho humano fundamental e interdependiente, tal y como se describe en el Artículo 18 de la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos. En consonancia con la Observación General nº 22 del PIDCP, consideramos la LRyC como un concepto amplio y multidimensional que debe ser protegido para todas las confesiones en todas las esferas de la sociedad.

Dr. Dennis P. Petri
(V.i.S.d.P.)
Director Internacional

Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Director Adjunto

Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
Editora Ejecutiva del International Journal for Religious Freedom (IJRF)

IIRF Reports Vol. 12 – 2023/17

This report is a reprint from: Petri, D. P., and Glasius, M. (2022). Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico. Human Rights Quarterly 44(3), 514–536. https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2022.0025.

Dennis P. Petri and Marlies Glasius

Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Dennis P. Petri, political scientist, international consultant and researcher. International Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. Founder and scholar-at-large of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. Executive Director of the Foundation Platform for Social Transformation. Associate Professor of International Relations and Head of the Chair of Humanities at the Latin American University of Science and Technology (Costa Rica). Adjunct Professor of International Negotiation and Research Methods at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (UNESCO). PhD in Political Philosophy from VU University Amsterdam. Master in Political Science from the Institute of Political Studies in Paris (Sciences Po) and Research Master in Comparative Politics specializing in Latin America from the same institution.

Marlies Glasius is Professor in International Relations at the Department of Politics, University of Amsterdam.

CONTENTS

Abstract

Existing theoretical frameworks and data collection tools relating to religious freedom suffer from various blind spots, leaving many forms of vulnerability of religiously motivated individuals and communities unobserved. We develop a new approach to observing violations of freedom of religion, informed by human security and with attention to active religious behavior. In a case study of the interactions of actively practicing Christians with crime syndicates in Northeast Mexico, we show that threats at the subnational level may have nothing to do with the quality of national legislation, and that religious freedom may be threatened by non-state actors who need not be religiously motivated. Most importantly, by focusing on religious behavior rather than religious identity, we bring to light the risks people may run because they translate their religiosity into behavior that involuntarily or intentionally challenges local powerholders.

Introduction

In a village in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, in 2014, a young Protestant pastor created a football team to keep local youths away from a life in the drug cartels. One of the youngsters who signed up for the team was killed. after giving up his job as a *halcón* (a term for informants and errand boys) for the drug cartel *Los Zetas*. The pastor himself started to receive death threats. There are many similar examples in which the social engagement of religious leaders has made them targets of "extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation, often from organized criminal groups."[1] Mexico has been characterized by Catholic authorities as "the most dangerous country in the world to exercise priesthood,"[2] citing more than 500 threats and thirty-one killings of priests in the past decade, mostly related to organized crime.[3]

But such casualties are rarely seen as having anything to do with freedom of religion. The common narrative is that in contexts of pervasive organized crime, everyone is suffering or at risk, so there is nothing specific about religious people. Besides, why would criminal organizations care about religion? Religiously motivated behavior that challenges the power of armed groups or corrupt or oppressive local authorities, and the vulnerabilities that can result from such behavior, are overlooked.

As we argue in this paper, the academic literature on religious conflicts and religious persecution departs from a number of assumptions that truncate our understanding of violations of religious freedom. First, such violations are

1 US Department of State, *Report on International Religious Freedom* (2015), https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper.

2 Juan Pablo Reyes and Iván Saldaña, *Crimen Acecha a Sacerdotes de la Iglesia Católica,* Excelsior (11 Jan. 2015).

3 See also Centro Católico Multimedial, *Unidad de Investigaciones Especiales del CCM, Evaluación del Sexenio 2012–2018* (n.d.), https://secureserver-ercdn.net/50.62.89.79/pz0.036.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Reporte-2018-OK-2.pdf.

typically understood in only two ways: either as the result of religious conflict by and between groups, in ways that are equivalent to, and typically correlate with, ethnic or linguistic discrimination or persecution, or as emanating from the state or from the religious majority, and always with a religious motive. Second, religious persecution is implicitly considered as experienced by groups, based on ascriptive identities and regardless of behavior. Third, religious persecution is assumed to be experienced equally everywhere within a state.

We posit that these assumptions leave many forms of vulnerability of religiously motivated individuals and communities unobserved. Following Wellman and Lombardi's invitation to explore the "understudied relationship" between religion and human security (2012), we show that threats to religious freedom can emanate from non-state actors, need not be religiously motivated, and can even be targeted at people belonging to the religious majority. Moreover, the extent to which religious freedom is threatened may differ based on individual behavior: actively practicing believers whose behavior threatens the powers that be are likely to be more at risk in certain contexts. As we will show, whether such threats can be specifically related to religiosity is often a matter of degree that is missed by binary categorizations as either "religious persecution" or "nothing to do with religion." Finally, the vulnerability of religiously motivated individuals and communities is often the result of specific local socio-political dynamics which are not necessarily observable at the national level.

The invisibility of these forms of vulnerability of religiously motivated individuals and communities has real-world consequences. An accumulation of documented incidents justifies attention to a specific social problem or social fact. If violations of religious freedom are not documented, it is as if they did not exist. This documentation 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.[4]

In our next section, we first offer a review of pertinent literature to make the case that the vulnerability of actively practicing religious individuals and communities is insufficiently recognized by existing theoretical frameworks and data collection tools and then propose our own alternative framework. We then illustrate our argument with a case study, based on original fieldwork, of the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians caused by criminal violence in the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and San Luis Potosí, Mexico. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for scholars and practitioners.

---

[4] Karyn Kaplan, Open Society Institute, Human Rights Documentation and Advocacy: A Guide For Organizations of People Who Use Drugs 25 (2009).

Vulnerability and active religious behavior: a new approach

Prevailing Blind Spots

Two fields of literature are particularly relevant to violations of freedom of religion: the subset of the literature on political violence that deals with religious conflict, and the data collection efforts and analyses we refer to as "religious freedom assessment tools" (RFATs). The political violence literature takes an interest in religiously motivated behavior primarily as a driver to commit violent acts, not as a source of potential victimhood.[5] It has also drawn attention to the role of interreligious networks not just in sparking but also in ending conflict.[6] But here too, the relation between "conflict" and "religion" is understood as referring exclusively to conflicts between religions. Situations in which non-religious actors—such as the drug cartels in Mexico—threaten religious individuals or communities without a religious motive, but with consequences for religious life, disappear from view.

Another strand in the literature on political violence, which fits the notion of religious persecution more closely, is the literature on violence against civilians. However, in line with the neglect of religion in political science, most work in this tradition misses religion as a source of vulnerability altogether, according to Daniel Philpott.[7] Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman's seminal work on violence against civilians[8] ignored religion as a factor of vulnerability, and subsequent studies have typically followed its lead.[9] One exception is Laia Balcells, who

5 See, e.g., Monica Duffy Toft, *Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War*, 31 Int'l Sec. 97 (2007); Isak Svensson, *Fighting with Faith: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars*, 51 J. Conflict Res. 930 (2007); Isak Svensson and Desiree Nilsson, *Disputes Over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015*, 62 J. Conflict Res. 1127 (2018); Therése Pettersson, Stina Högbladh and Magnus Öberg, *Organized Violence, 1989–2018 and Peace Agreements*, 56 J. Peace Res. 589 (2019).

6 R. Scott Appleby, The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation (2000); Religion and Human Security: A Global Perspective (James K Wellman & Clark Lombardi eds., 2012); Isak Svensson, Ending Holy Wars: Religion and Conflict Resolution in Civil Wars (2012); Johannes Vüllers, Birte Pfeiffer and Matthias Basedau, *Measuring the Ambivalence of Religion: Introducing the Religion and Conflict in Developing Countries (RCDC) Dataset*, 41 Int'l Interactions 857 (2015).

7 Daniel Philpott, *Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?*, 12 Ann. Rev. Pol. Sci. 183, 184–92 (2009). See also Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century (2010); Religion and Human Security, *supra* note 6; Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution (Daniel Philpott & Timothy Samuel Shaw eds., 2018).

8 Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman, *One-Sided Violence Against Civilians in War: Insights From New Fatality Data*, 44 J. Peace Res. 233 (2007).

9 Clionadh Raleigh, *Violence Against Civilians: A Disaggregated Analysis*, 38 Int'l Interactions 462 (2012); Benjamin A. Valentino, *Why We Kill: The Political Science of Political Violence against Civilians*, 17 Ann. Rev. Pol. Sci. 89 (2014); Erik Melander, Therese Pettersson and Lotta Themner, *Organized Violence 1989–2015*, 53 J. Peace Res. 727 (2016).

finds a strong positive correlation between "Catholic centers" and executions of civilians by leftist groups during the Spanish civil war.[10]

The research on religious freedom and religious persecution is quite disconnected from this political violence literature and takes a different approach. It *does* focus on religion as a source of vulnerability, but it tends to treat religion as a collective and ascriptive phenomenon, something one is born into rather than an active choice or a source of individual inspiration and behavior. The most common RFATs are the "Global Restrictions on Religion" indices developed by the Pew Research Center, adapted from the methodology developed by Brian Grim and Roger Finke, which codify the International Religious Freedom Reports of the US State Department; the Religion and State Project at Bar-Ilan University; and the more advocacyoriented World Watch List (WWL) of the faith-based charity Open Doors International, which focuses exclusively on Christians.[11]

RFATs tended to focus exclusively on persecution by the state. Recently, persecution originating from within society has been incorporated by the Pew Research Center through its Social Hostilities Index (SHI), by the RAS Project's new societal module, and by the WWL's identification of societal actors exerting pressure on Christians. The SHI follows the political violence literature in approaching religion as a driver to committing violent acts and as a source of violence for religious groups.[12] Its composite measure ranks countries on the relative degree of (violent) hostility between religious groups, but it has little to say about how violations of religious freedom are experienced by its victims, nor does its methodology account for differences between majority and minority religious groups, or behavioral subsets within these groups.

The RAS3 Societal Discrimination and Religious Minorities Module represents an important step forward in not only recognizing but also monitoring infringements on freedom of religion emanating from society at large and from specific non-state actors, ranging from "subtle" to "lethal" forms.[13] As its name suggests, the focus lies on societal majorities hampering or harassing religious minorities, although minority-on-majority and minority-on-minority violence are also included. However, all its measures approach religion as a collective

---

[10] Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge: Violence Against Civilians in Conventional Civil Wars*, 54 Int'l Stud. Q. 291, 302 (2010).

[11] Pew Research Center, Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016 (2018) [hereinafter Pew Research 2018]; Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion*, 2 Interdisc. J. Res. Religion 1 (2006); US Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Reports*, https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/; *the Religion and State Project (RAS)*, Bar-Ilan University, https://www.thearda.com/ras/; Jonathan Fox, Roger Finke and Dane R. Mataic, *New Data and Measures on Societal Discrimination and Religious Minorities*, 14 Interdisc. J. Res. Religion 1 (2018); World Watch List (WWL) of the faith-based charity Open Doors International, which focuses exclusively on Christians. Open Doors, World Watch List (2020); Christof Sauer, *Measuring Persecution: The new Questionnaire Design of the World Watch List*, 5 Int'l J. Rel. Freedom 21 (2012).

[12] Pew Research 2018, *supra* note 11, at 81–88.

[13] Fox, Finke and Mataic, *supra* note 11.

phenomenon: one is either a member of a religious minority or of the religious majority. In Germany, for instance, the RAS documents discrimination against four minority groups: Muslims, Jews, Orthodox Christians, and Scientologists.[14] Such collective identity-based measures leave vulnerabilities incurred through religiously inspired behavior by individuals, particularly if they belong to nominal majorities, out of consideration. The WWL—while its proximity to the Christian grassroots, particularly among converts, is unique[15]—suffers from the inevitable biases of expert opinion-based databases. Moreover, it collects data exclusively on Christians in the fifty countries where they experience the most persecution, and like the other RFATs, it focuses predominantly on religious identity.[16]

Collective identity-based measures of religious vulnerability, which treat religion as a trait equivalent to ethnic identity, miss an important point about religion. To give a hyperbolic example, RFATs would not have been able to observe the religious persecution of Martin Luther because he did not belong to a recognized religious minority at the time of his rebellion against the Catholic Church. Nor would they have recognized the vulnerability of his namesake Dr. Martin Luther King, whose political activism was evidently religiously inspired, but whose vulnerability did not stem from being a Baptist. As we show in our case study, these iconic figures are but the tip of the iceberg of the many instances of vulnerability deriving from religious behavior that collective and ascriptive conceptions of religious identity cannot capture.

Moreover, the "subnational turn" in international studies has yet to have much impact on religious freedom literature.[17] While RFATs may take local variations into account when relevant, they typically collect, collate, and analyze data only at the national level.[18] Hence, it suffers from what Stein Rokkan called the "whole-nation bias": their unit of analysis is the nationstate, implying that their findings are macro-level aggregates that often insufficiently recognize subnational dynamics.[19] However, it is precisely at the subnational level that some of the most poignant violations of freedom of religion, including the dynamic related to organized crime we discuss below, take place.

[14] *Id*. at 4; see also Jonathan Fox, Roger Finke and Marie Ann Eisenstein, *Examining the Causes of Government-Based Discrimination Against Religious Minorities in Western Democracies*, 17 comp. Eur. pol. 885 (2019).

[15] Sauer, *supra* note 11.

[16] Open Doors, *supra* note 11.

[17] See Kristian S. Gleditsch and Michael D. Ward, *Measuring Space: A Minimum-Distance Database and Applications to International Studies*, 38 J. Peace Res. 739 (2001); Halvard Buhaug and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, *Contagion or Confusion? Why Conflicts Cluster in Space*, 52 Int'l Stud. Q. 215 (2008) for seminal contributions.

[18] See Marc Helbling and Richard Traunmüller, *How State Support of Religion Shapes Attitudes Toward Muslim Immigrants: New Evidence from a Subnational Comparison*, 49 Comp. Pol. Stud. 391 (2016) for an exception.

[19] Stein Rokkan, citizens, Elections, parties: approaches to the comparative study of the process of Development 49 (2009) [1970].

A final problem with the RFATs is their weddedness to the term "religious persecution," commonly used by faith-based organizations and scholars specializing in religion. Definitions of persecution vary widely, ranging from its specific understanding in international criminal law to broader interpretations that could include many dimensions of religious freedom, but these are not always reflected in the RFATs that operationalize the term. Moreover, the use of the term persecution by faith-based organizations often has theological connotations of suffering and martyrdom that are not analytically helpful.

The general deficiencies we have identified within the literature are reproduced when we turn to our case study, the vulnerability of active religious groups and individuals in relation to drug cartels in Mexico. Important research has been done on the degree and forms of violence against civilians caused by the drug cartels.[20] Specific vulnerabilities of one group, namely journalists, have been researched in this context, but not other vulnerable groups such as actively religious people.[21] The RFATs have documented that at the level of national legislation, Mexico continues to place significant restrictions on religious institutions. Religious education is allowed only in private schools, and some forms of religious expression are forbidden in the public sphere. At the state and local levels, evangelism and access to media broadcasts are often restricted to Protestants.[22] But the much more blatant restrictions, vulnerabilities, and sometimes outright repression that actively religious Christians experience at the hands of drug cartels, receive little or no attention in these reports.

Considering the limitations of the existing frameworks to assess religious conflict and persecution, we propose a new approach that can shed more light on understudied aspects of freedom of religion and its violations. Our approach consists of three elements. First, we discuss the advantages of a human security approach, which gives us the framework and vocabulary to move beyond the current twin focus on interreligious violence and statesanctioned infringement, and to move beyond the state as the sole unit of analysis. Second, we discern different gradations in active religious behavior, which have consequences for the nature of religious people's vulnerability. Finally, we propose a graduated approach to the level of specificity of threats to religious individuals and communities, i.e. to what extent they are vulnerable to threats because of their religion.

---

[20] Andrenas Schedler, En la Niebla de la Guerra: los Ciudadanos ante la Violencia Criminal Organizada (2d ed. 2015); Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Why did Drug Cartels go to war in Mexico? Subnational Party Alternation, the Breakdown of Criminal Protection, and the Onset of Large-Scale Violence*, 51 Comp. Pol. Stud. 900 (2018); Angelica Durán-Martínez, The Politics of Drug Violence Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico (2018); David Shirk and Joel Wallman, *Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence*, 59 J. Con. Res. 1348 (2015); Javior Osorio, *The Contagion of Drug Violence: Spatiotemporal Dynamics of the Mexican War on Drugs*, 59 J. Con. Res. 1403 (2015).

[21] Bradley E. Holland & Viridiana Rios, *Informally Governing Information: How Criminal Rivalry Leads to Violence Against the Press in Mexico*, 61 J. Con. Res. 1095 (2015).

[22] Jonathan Fox, Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data (2015); Pew Research 2018, *supra* note 11, at 81–88.

A Human Security Approach: Vulnerability and Spaces

In our approach to freedom of religion, we are guided by the human security paradigm, which shifted the focus of security from the state to the individual and the community,[23] and, more particularly, by Taylor Owen's operationalization of this concept.[24] According to a seminal definition, "[t]he objective of human security is to safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfilment."[25] A human security approach brings several advantages to the study of violations of religious freedom. It moves away from the preoccupation with *either* interreligious strife *or* state-sanctioned violations as the sole sources of such violations, opening up a much wider panoply of potential perpetrators and motivations, which may include state or non-state actors with religious or non-religious motivations. It brings into view the potential role of non-state actors such as criminal organizations, armed groups, or indigenous authorities as perpetrators of human rights abuses involving freedom of religion. Moreover, Sabina Alkire and Taylor Owen's use of the term "vulnerability" in relation to human security threats provides a vocabulary that encompasses narrower terms such as "discrimination," "violence," and the ambiguous "persecution," incorporating the entire range from very minor infractions to life-threatening acts.[26] Finally, a human security approach takes us away from the methodological nationalism of the RFATs, inviting us to identify "local hotspots rather than creating a national index."[27]

Active Religious Behavior

Article eighteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that freedom of religion implies the freedom for anyone to change their religion, and "alone or in community with others and in public or private, to *manifest* his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."[28] Hence, it always recognized that religion was more than a matter of identity or a set of beliefs. Including a behavioral component in our understanding of religion makes it possible to distinguish between vulnerability that results from religious identity per se and vulnerability that results from behavior inspired by religious convictions.

---

[23] Astri Suhrke, *Human Security and the Interests of States*, 30 Sec. Dialogue 265 (1999); Sabina Alkire, *A Conceptual Framework for Human Security*, Working Paper CRIS (2003); Commission on Human Security, Human Security Now (2003); Marlies Glasius, *Human Security from Paradigm Shift to Operationalization: Job Description for a Human Security Worker*, 39 Sec. Dialogue 31 (2008).

[24] Taylor R. Owen, *Measuring Human Security: Methodological Challenges and the Importance of Geographically Referenced Determinants*, Environmental Change and Human Security: Recognizing and Acting on Hazard Impacts 35 (P.H. Liotta et al. eds., 2008).

[25] Alkira, supra note 23, at 2.

[26] *Id*. at 18, 38; Owen, *supra* note 24.

[27] Owen, *supra* note 24, at 53.

[28] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *adopted* Dec. 10, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A (III), U.N. GAOR, 3d Sess, U.N. Doc. A/RES/3/217A, art. 18 (1948) (emphasis added).

We propose operationalizing this broad definition of religion as a continuum from passive religious identity to active religious behavior.

Religious identity	**Religious behaiviour**		
Passive	*Semi-active*		*Active*
Religious self-identification	Religious participation	Religious lifestyle	Missionary activity
			Civic participation

Figure 1. Continuum of religious identity and behavior

The most passive form is religious self-identification, like in a population census, which need not imply any active religious behavior at all. Religious participation comprises institutionalized religious activities such as attendance (in varying frequency) at religious services and ceremonies, and participation in religious instruction. Religious lifestyles concern behavioral choices that go beyond participation, such as not eating meat or abstaining from drinking alcohol. Religious lifestyles may be seen as deviant when they imply some form of rejection of social norms or expected behaviors. For example, religiously inspired pacifists may refuse to do military service, or individuals who consider honesty and integrity as a religious norm may refuse to pay bribes when doing so is expected.

The most active forms of religious behavior are missionary activity and civic participation. Missionary activities, also referred to as proselytism, are undertaken with the aim of making converts. Civic participation comprises engagement in charitable work or involvement in civil society or politics as a result of religious convictions. The distinction between missionary activity and civic participation is often blurry in practice, as some forms of civic participation have a missionary goal. Our opening vignette of the football team is an example: the minister wanted not only to provide an alternative to the drug cartels, but also to draw the youngsters into an active Christian life. Nonetheless, it makes sense to distinguish missionary and civic activities for analytical purposes. By adopting this continuum, we can identify "actively religious" individuals based on their engagement in certain types of behavior that distinguishes them from (more) passive adherents of the same religion and focus on risks resulting from such behavior.

Specificity of Threats

When is a threat or act of violence against an individual who happens to be religious an infringement on freedom of religion? Purely religious conflicts are extremely rare. The cases of the two Luthers are again illustrative. Luther of Wittenberg's ninety-five theses were as much an attack on the Catholic Church as a worldly institution as a declaration of faith, and obviously had huge political

implications.[29] Still, no one would doubt that the subsequent threats against him were the result of his religiously inspired behavior. But what of Martin Luther King? He consistently characterized his civil rights activism as inseparable from his religiosity by stating that "all that I do in civil rights I do because I consider it a part of my ministry".[30] But he also fought alongside civil rights activists who were non-religious, belonged to different Christian churches, or to the Nation of Islam, who suffered from similar threats. Was Martin Luther King vulnerable and ultimately killed for his religious behavior or not? Any binary answer to this question constitutes an unhelpful simplification. A simple no would negate the religious inspiration that King himself emphasized, and that constituted not only his motivation but also an essential part of his appeal as a leader. A simple yes would miscast a struggle by people of various faiths and none for racial equality in the mold of a religious struggle.

As these examples illustrate, binary approaches to specificity are misleading. Threats against religious individuals and communities are often voided of their religious aspect on the basis that they are not specifically related to religion. And sometimes the opposite occurs: a multi-faceted situation is simplified under the rubric of religious conflict. In both scenarios, the analysis is subject to the single-cause fallacy. Instead, we advance that one should discern different degrees of specificity (uniqueness), i.e., determine to what extent the vulnerability is specific to religious individuals and communities and based on their religion. We propose a sliding scale that enables differentiation between threats that are only applicable to specific religious individuals and communities and threats they share with others. For the purposes of this article, we distinguish between not very specific, medium specific, and highly specific threats.

It is important to bear in mind that specificity is separate from severity or intensity. To say that a threat has a low degree of specificity means that it is not unique to religious individuals or communities, but it may well be life-threatening to them. Inversely, a threat with a high degree of specificity can have a low intensity. A refusal by a school to admit pupils with headscarves but not pupils with skullcaps or other headgear would be a highly specific threat, but not an intense one if good educational alternatives are locally available.

In our next section, we apply our human security approach, with attention to different degrees of active religious behavior and different levels of specificity, to the vulnerability of actively religious Christians in relation to drug cartels in three states in Mexico. This will demonstrate how our approach makes visible certain forms of vulnerability that have been neglected in the past or have been improperly interpreted as having nothing to do with religion.

---

[29] David B. Morris, *Martin Luther as Priest, Heretic, and Outlaw: The Reformation at 500* (2017), https://www.loc.gov/rr/european/luther.html.

[30] Martin Luther King, *Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool, Delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church*, Chicago, Illinois (Aug. 27, 1967), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOVaRxOy8ts.

Case study selection and methods

We illustrate the value of our conceptual innovations by studying the case of actively practicing Christians in three states in the Northeast of Mexico: Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and San Luis Potosí, which between 2009 and 2015, were greatly affected by the activities of *Los Zetas* and other drug cartels. An important reason for choosing this case is that the majority of Mexicans self-identify as Christians, so there is no noteworthy state repression or societal hostility against Christians as such. While Protestant Christians do constitute a minority, the kinds of threats they faced from the drug cartels were, in fact, very similar to those faced by Catholics. The case is intended as illustrative, showing that religious vulnerability may occur at the subnational level, can come from non-state actors, can vary with behavior, and can be specific to religiosity in various degrees.

The commonly accepted narrative about the threats posed by the drug cartels in Mexico is that they affect the whole population and do not stem from religious motives. We demonstrate not only that actively practicing Christians, Christian leaders, and churches have often suffered human rights abuses at the hand of organized crime in recent years, but also that there is a demonstrable specificity to such threats (some more than others).

The specific vulnerabilities we identify in this particular case will not be manifested elsewhere in the exact same ways. That said, similar incidents have been reported in other crime-torn regions of Mexico, in Latin America more generally, and elsewhere in the world. Our analysis may be relevant, for instance, to violations of freedom of religion in the context of the drugrelated conflicts in the Caribbean region, 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 to conflicts between religious individuals and communities and organized crime in sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, or even in the inner cities of the United States.

The data for this case study was collected through extensive fieldwork (three field trips in which over forty people were interviewed) by one of the authors, in combination with the collection of a range of secondary data. Over a period of six years, we collected both qualitative and quantitative data, including newspaper articles, statistics, church and NGO reports, personal testimonies, and other sources, about the position of actively practicing Christians in the northeastern states of Mexico. We also maintained close contact with the staff of NGOs working in the area, receiving their first-hand reports.

The conduct of the field research involved security risks, both for one of the authors, and for the interviewees. Traveling through these states, especially Tamaulipas, was a risk in itself, considering the high rate of kidnappings. After hearing about the purpose of our research, several church representatives were visibly alarmed and refused interviews, cancelled with very short notice, or made excuses saying, for instance, that the pastor was out of town or had moved to another congregation (Interview 10). This likely happened because of fear of giving information that might put them in danger. Some interviewees

outright denied they had ever been victims of hostilities by drug cartels, but based on the comments of other sources, we are inclined to believe that at least some of these categorical denials stemmed from fear. Most interviewees gladly accepted the opportunity to be interviewed, giving detailed information and sharing many anecdotes. Some requested specific precautions, such as not being recorded, photographed, or named. One interviewee asked to be interviewed in a parking lot next to a busy road, making the interview look like a casual encounter. Another interviewee asked to be interviewed at his home at a very late hour. We have anonymized the names of all interviewees. Information from the interviews was cross-checked and complemented with public sources such as NGO reports, academic articles, survey data, and newspaper articles. The data is likely incomplete because many human security threats related to organized crime, including threats to actively practicing Christians, go unreported. Moreover, while there is considerable research literature about the Mexican drug cartels, very little has been written about the vulnerability of religious minorities in this context.

At the time of writing, the *Los Zetas* cartel no longer occupies the dominant position it did when our fieldwork was conducted. After the capture of its leader Omar Treviño in 2015, *Los Zetas* split into various rivaling factions and lost much strength and territorial control in Mexico and the United States due to further arrests, increasing pressure from rival drug cartels, and relatively successful security operations by the Mexican government.[31]

However, its successors continue to be responsible for much violence in Northeast Mexico and beyond, and actively practicing Christians remain vulnerable. On September 19, 2019, for example, the Northeast Cartel, a breakaway group of *Los Zetas*, abducted a Protestant pastor in Nuevo Laredo who had been defending immigrants from extortion.[32] Two weeks earlier, also in Nuevo Laredo, a Catholic priest had been abducted when he tried to prevent a criminal group from kidnapping Cuban migrants.[33]

Actively practicing Christians and crime syndicates in nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and San Luis Potosí

In the following, we discuss our main empirical findings concerning the threats actively practicing Christians in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and San Luis Potosí are subject to by crime syndicates. We only discuss threats related to semi-

[31] Los Zetas: *la Caída del Cartel Narco más Violento de México*, Infobae (Feb. 13, 2018); Parker Asmann, *Los Zetas: De Poderoso Cartel de México a Agrupación Fragmentada*, InSight Crime (Apr. 10, 2018).

[32] *Cártel del Noreste Secuestra Joven Pastor Cristiano por Negarse a Entregar a Migrantes: Este Grupo Además Tiene Amenazada a la Familia del Religioso por Denunciar el Secuestro*, La Opinión (Sept. 12, 2019).

[33] *Protegió a Unos Migrantes Para que no los Secuestraran y se lo Llevaron a él: Sacerdote Mexicano lleva 9 Días Desaparecido*, Univisión (Aug. 12, 2019), https://www.univision.com/noticias/criminalidad/protegio-a-unos-migrantes-para-que-no-los-secuestraran-y-selo-llevaron-a-el-sacerdote-mexicano-lleva-9-dias-desaparecido.

active and active forms of religious behavior because these are the ones that are understudied. Following our categorization in Figure 1, we look at the continuum from religious participation to missionary activities and civic participation. For each type of threat, we also discuss the degree of specificity to this group, i.e., to what extent it is directly attributable to, and unique to, the different forms of religious behavior of Christians.

Threats Related to Religious Participation

Religious participation, referring to attendance at religious services and membership in religious organizations, corresponds to the right to freedom of worship, one of the central dimensions of religious freedom. As our fieldwork in Northeast Mexico revealed, due to the presence of crime syndicates, the mere exercise of this right can be a source of vulnerability for Christian ministers as well as ordinary church members. The most pervasive threat related to religious participation that we identified is protection charges and extortion.

Drug cartels have implemented a sophisticated "tax" collection system in the territories under their control, commonly known as *derecho de piso* [floor right] or *venta de protección* [protection racket]. All manner of institutions are charged a flat fee or a percentage of their proceeds for the right to remain open or to be allowed to organize a public meeting.[34] Threats are made if the extorted entity refuses to pay. Victims often cannot report the threats because the police are corrupt.[35] As many as 90 percent to 94 percent may go unreported.[36] (Interviews 3, 7, 15, 24).

Many churches, confessional educational and health institutions, and businesses owned by Christians are required to pay *derecho de piso* in order to be allowed to remain open. This was a recurrent theme in most of the interviews conducted and is by far the most significant threat to church life in the researched states.[37] (Interviews 1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13). A receptionist at a large church in Monterrey involuntarily drew attention to the phenomenon by saying: "There is no need for an interview with the pastor because we don't pay *derecho de piso* here," even before she was asked about it. (Interview 11). One

---

[34] Charles Torres, *Impresentable: Pastores de Michoacán Deben Pagar a Narcos Para Realizar Eventos Masivos en sus Iglesias*, Noticia Cristiana (Apr. 12, 2010), https://www. noticiacristiana.com/iglesia/2010/04/impresentable-pastores-de-michoacan-deben-pagara-narcos-para-realizar-eventos-masivos-en-sus-iglesias.html; *Pago de "Derecho de Piso" se Extiende en Todo el País*, El Universal (Oct. 4, 2011), https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/82400.html.

[35] Schedier, *supra* note 20.

[36] José Luis Chicoma, Liliana Alvarado, Dalia Toledo, Cerca Diseño, José Lobo Carrillo and Leonel Fernández Novelo, Reporte Ethos: Descifrando, el Gasto Público en Seguridad (2017), https://www.ethos.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/SeguridadFnlDigital.compressed.pdf.

[37] Lucas Torres, *Predicting Levels of Latino Depression: Acculturation, Acculturative Stress, and Coping*, 16 Cultural Div. & Ethnic Minority Psych. 256 (2010); *Imparables Asesinatos y Extorsiones Contra Iglesia*, Centro Católico Multimedial (Oct. 7, 2016), http://ccm.org.mx/2016/10/imparables-asesinatos-extorsiones-iglesia/.

interviewee, a former drug addict and trafficker who now runs a drug rehabilitation program in Monterrey, asserted that all pastors in the area pay *derecho de piso*, "including the president of the council of pastors of Monterrey, although he would deny it." (Interview 8). Another, a pastor of a church located in San Pedro, a wealthy and highly policed suburb of Monterrey, indicated that there might be exceptions, but generally, extortions on churches appear to be commonplace. (Interview 17). The consequences of not paying the requested *derecho de piso* are severe. In the least bad case, churches or businesses have had to close down, (Interviews 1, 8) but we also heard about a Christian educational institution near Tampico that was burned after its leaders refused to pay *derecho de piso*. (Interview 9). A pastoral family left their hometown in Ciudad Victoria and moved 600 kilometers south because they were threatened with death if they did not pay a certain amount. (Interview 16).

We categorize the threat of illegal charges and extortion as *low specificity*, see Table 1. Extortion in the form of *derecho de piso* is a frequently used income-generating activity for drug cartels, and many non-Christian businesses and organizations are affected. Nonetheless, actively practicing

Christians are specifically vulnerable to some extent for several reasons. Most importantly, churches are perceived to have large amounts of ready money because of the offerings they collect. (Interview 21). Moreover, church services are unique in terms of their visibility and the large number of people they attract with recurring frequency. They are also generally easy to enter because most churches want to be welcoming to visitors. Finally, churches can be viewed as easy prey for theological reasons. One pastor declared: "Christians are particularly vulnerable because they don't defend themselves. They are an easy target. *Los Zetas* know that Christians are more passive and that they won't fight back." (Interviews 3, 7, 8, 15).

Table 1
Active religious behavior and specificity of threats

	Semi-active		*Active*	
	Religious participation	*Religious lifestyle*	*Missionary activity*	*Civic participation*
Low specificity				pressures on social initiatives
Medium specificity	kidnap for ransom; restrictions on church services	intimidation against non-compliance		intimidation of denouncers of injustice
High specificity	imposition of *Santa Muerte* rituals		reprisals for conversion; intimidation of proselytizers	

Next to extortion, kidnap-for-ransom is a common threat in Northeast Mexico. It frequently affects Christian ministers and church administrators, both in the church and the business sphere. As explained, churches and their leaders are often seen as revenue centers by drug cartels because of the offerings they collect. Although this perception is generally wrong—only in the case of the larger churches do the offerings represent substantial amounts— sources suggest that it is widespread among drug cartels. (Interview 3).[38]

And again, people who frequent churches are vulnerable because houses of worship are generally easy to identify and enter. This vulnerability is exemplified by an incident in Monterrey, where *Los Zetas* members raided the church during a service, held the pastor at gunpoint, and forced the

congregation to pay a certain amount to spare his life. (Interview 8). Unsurprisingly perhaps, an increasing number of churches hire private security to protect their facilities. The scope of the kidnappings is difficult to assess quantitatively but there is no doubt that actively practicing Christians are greatly affected. A pastor of a large church in Ciudad Victoria told us: "Last Sunday I asked all people to raise their hands who had a family member or friend who is currently abducted. 129 people raised their hands." (Interview 13). Others shared similar testimonies. (Interviews 9, 18, 22). Many more reports confirm that kidnap-for-ransom of Christian leaders is a trend. (Interviews 22, 23, 24).[39]

We consider the threat of kidnap-for-ransom as *medium specificity*. It affects broad segments of society and is not exclusive to Christians; however, there is something notable about the characteristics of this group that makes their likelihood to be vulnerable to this threat comparatively higher. First, as discussed above, actively practicing Christians are easily identifiable and often consciously make themselves approachable to strangers. Second, the moral influence of church leaders, especially those who play an active role in caring for vulnerable groups such as youths and drug addicts, can be perceived as offensive to crime syndicates, which may be an inducement to abduct these people rather than others.

Crime syndicates also place restrictions on church services. In many areas, church leaders decided not to organize night-time church services for security reasons, and in some areas, no church services were organized at all. (Interview 1, 6, 7, 9). A pastor from Ciudad Victoria stated:

> In 2010 and 2011 we lived through two years of unprecedented violence. We suffered many kidnappings, extortions and other abuses. We stopped organizing church meetings at night, and church attendance decreased considerably. In 2011, we wanted to organize a large prayer service in a

[38] See also Omar Sotelo Aguilar, Tragedia y Crisol del Sacerdocio en México (2017). The book was published in 2017, and the documentary with same title launched in 2021.

[39] See also Agenzia Fides, *A Priest of the Diocese of Ciudad Victoria has Been Missing Since November, Violence Does not Calm Down* (Jan. 7, 2014), https://www.fides.org/en/news/34988-AMERICA_MEXICO_A_priest_of_the_diocese_of_Ciudad_Victoria_has_been_missing_since_November_violence_does_not_calm_down.

> stadium, but many pastors did not want to send their church members to this gathering because they knew that *Los Zetas* would be throwing grenades at them. (Interview 6).

In some cases, the decision to suspend church services followed a direct order of a drug cartel. One pastor declared: "in Ciudad Mante, *Los Zetas* set a curfew and have explicitly ordered all churches not to organize any church services at night. We have no option than to obey this order, because they are the real authority in this city." (Interviews 1, 22). When fewer people attend church services, or services are suspended because of threats, the financial sustainability of some churches is also threatened. According to a pastor from Ciudad Victoria, "(m)ost of the big tithers [i.e. people paying up to 10 percent of their income to the church] left because of the extortions." (Interview 6). Another pastor's story illustrates how different kinds of threats combine to hamper freedom of religion in the face of the cartels:

> The income of many churches went down because we are collecting much less tithes. Many pastors can no longer provide for their families. I had to open a small business, but they started to claim *derecho de piso*. Because I did not want to pay, I was forced to close this business. (Interview 1).

Moreover, there are reports of individuals who are prohibited from attending church services or obliged to report to the drug cartels whenever they visit a particular church. (Interviews 1, 8).

Not only Christians are affected by restrictions on public gatherings: any large gathering of people can be expected to attract the attention of criminal organizations, to be at risk of being interrupted and attacked for extortion or kidnappings, and sometimes face restrictions. The right that is violated is freedom of assembly, which intersects in the case of church meetings with freedom of worship. Church meetings, however, are the most visible, recurrent, and easily accessible manifestation of the general class of large gatherings in the context of Northeast Mexico. They generally have less security than other large meetings because barriers to access are in inherent tension with the mission of the church. We, therefore, classify restrictions on church services as *medium specific* threats.

Finally, some of the Mexican crime syndicates are responsible for the imposition of Santa Muerte rituals in churches. Santa Muerte is an expression of Mexican folk religion that revolves around the *Niña Blanca* (White Girl), a skeletal grim reaper image who is believed to have the power to deflect bullets. The Santa Muerte cult has a widespread following among the members of drug cartels, especially *Los Zetas* and the Gulf Cartel.[40] This cult not only inspires members

[40] Ioan Grillo, El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency (2011); Anne C. de Koster, *On the Instrumental Role of Excessive Violence in los Zetas' Emergence as a Drug Cartel* (Bachelor's Thesis, Utrecht: Universiteit (2012); George W. Grayson, The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an Instrument of Cartel Warfare (2014), https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/2267.pdf; Tony M. Kail, Narco-Cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars (2015); Teun

of these cartels to extreme violence and cruelty; followers have also sometimes imposed the celebration of Santa Muerte rituals and the display of its shrines inside churches. (Interviews 1, 6, 7, 8).[41] When church leaders refuse to collaborate, they can face violent reprisals. A news service reported that in December 2013, a priest was believed to have been "assassinated . . . because he refused to celebrate a mass dedicated to Santa Muerte in his church."[42]

While less frequent than cases of extortion or restrictions on church services, these incidents strike at the heart of freedom of religion, more specifically of church autonomy. We characterize them as *high specificity*, because they do not affect non-religious groups or individuals: it is because these are (mainly Catholic) houses of worship that the Santa Muerte rituals and statues are imposed.

Threats Related to Religious Lifestyle

Religious lifestyle is a less familiar category than religious participation. It is often associated with conservative religious values in the private sphere, but it can also imply refusing to be complicit in criminal activities. A development worker explains how Christian values may constitute a threat to the drug cartels: "biblical teachings forbid consumption and distribution of drugs and/or corruption, and this affects their business." (Interview 22). Above, we already mentioned the threat of kidnap-for-ransom for commercial reasons. However, threats and actual kidnapping may also be intended to intimidate people for non-compliance with the drug cartels' orders, for instance, refusal to pay extortion money or ransom. One of our respondents shared a particularly cruel account about an evangelical pastor in a crimetorn city in Tamaulipas who was kidnapped, ostensibly for ransom, after he had refused to pay *derecho de piso*:

> His wife and family succeeded in collecting the money and the criminals came to take it. The pastor's wife asked them: "But where is my husband?" "He is at the beginning of your street," they told her. When she went there, her husband was there. Only he was not alive. She found him in a plastic garbage bag, killed and hacked into pieces. (Interview 1)

This incident shows that religious individuals are frequent victims of kidnappings, not only as a money-making operation but also as a method to punish disobedience. While in this case the family had paid the ransom, others may refuse the payment of ransom itself on the basis of religious principles, despite the tremendous risks associated with such an attitude.

A pastor from San Luis Potosí shared that he was under threat of being kidnapped: "My wife and I have been receiving calls in which we were threatened

Voeten, *The Mexican Drug Violence: Hybrid Warfare, Predatory Capitalism and the Logic of Cruelty* (Doctoral Dissertation, Universiteit Leiden, 2018).

[41] See also Robert J. Bunker & Pamela L. Bunker, *Recent Santa Muerte Spiritual Conflict Trends*, Small Wars J. (2014), https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/recent-santa-muertespiritual-conflict-trends.

[42] Noticiero Milamex, *México: Narco-Persecución Contra Cristianos* (Mar. 11, 2014).

with kidnapping. I told my children that if I'm kidnapped, they should never pay any ransom. We can only trust in God." (Interview 21). We consider these as *medium specific* threats: other persons, not motivated by religion, may also refuse to comply with the orders of the drug cartels on principle. However, in the case of actively practicing Christians, their vulnerability follows directly from their religious lifestyle and values.

Threats Related to Missionary Activity

The freedom to have, choose, change, or leave a religion or belief implies a right to present one's faith to others, i.e. missionary activity. Crime syndicates may interfere with this form of religious behavior when it involves attempts at converting cartel members, menacing both converts and converters. The first threat in this category concerns reprisals for conversion and consequent abandonment of a drug cartel. The conversion of a cartel member is more than a mere identity change. What causes the risk of reprisal is that cartel members who convert to Christianity consequently abandon their cartel and may betray their former peers or actively seek to convert other cartel members. A pastor from Nuevo Leon shared a story about a convert who had attended his drug rehabilitation center: "Shortly after he left *Los Zetas*, the last thing we heard was that he was going to visit his family in Reynosa. He disappeared. We never heard from him again." (Interview 8). Another pastor shared a story about a prison convert: "(t)wo days before he got out of prison he was killed. *Los Zetas* did not want it to become known that he had converted to Christianity. I officiated at his funeral." (Interview 7). He explained the motive: "(w)hat the cartels are afraid of is that they may lose their leaders if they are exposed to the Gospel." (Interview 7). In the press, further stories can be found about what happens to former cartel members who convert to Christianity.[43]

A connected threat is the intimidation of Christian workers who convert cartel members. Christian workers who actively reach out to cartel members to share about the Christian faith can expect to receive death threats. For example, one pastor reported: "One night we wanted to organize an evangelistic campaign in Linares, where many cartel members live. We had to cancel this activity due to the risk of gunfire and extortions." (Interview 7). Another missionary gave additional examples:

> a friend from the Bible institute where I studied contacted me and told me his uncle had received death threats because he was preaching to youths who had been recruited by the cartels in Padilla, Tamaulipas. I was also told about a team of five people who left for an evangelistic mission to the mountains of Matamoros [Tamaulipas, where Los Zetas were known to hide]. None of them came back. I'm afraid they were kidnapped and killed, because no one asked for ransom to be paid. (Interview 23)

[43] Charles Torres, *Conversión de "Narcos": Posible Explicación a los ataques a Centros de Rehabilitación en México, Noticia Cristiana* (June 25, 2010), https://www.noticiacristiana.com/policialjudicial/2010/06/conversion-de-narcos-posible-explicacion-a-los-ataques-acentros-de-rehabilitacion-en-mexico.html.

We consider these threats, as they relate to converts and converters alike, as *high specificity* threats: they occur only because the converts embrace religion and consequently abandon their criminal peers and activities. While there may be occasional individual cases where a cartel member turns his back on a life of crime without religious motive, it is only in the case of conversions that this becomes a significant societal phenomenon.

Threats Related to Civic Participation

Civic participation touches upon fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. These rights intersect with religious freedom when the engagement in charitable work, civil society, or politics is a result of religious convictions. The threat of intimidation against leaders who speak out against injustice particularly affects those religious leaders whose interpretation of Christianity causes them to promote spiritual *and* social transformation. Only a minority of practicing Catholics take part in civic engagement.[44] Among Protestants too, this only involves a minority; the predominant isolationist (pietistic) theological option in Latin America discourages active social engagement.[45] Speaking out against injustice publicly—whether it is against violence, drug consumption, drug trafficking, corruption, or organized crime—from the pulpit or in another setting, is dangerous. Most interviewees indicated that there is widespread surveillance within churches and that the content of sermons is monitored. "We need to be very careful about preaching against organized crime. There are always *halcones* in services," said a youth pastor in Ciudad Madero (Interview 14). A pastor in Ciudad Victoria (TS) is one of the few who said he publicly denounces injustice in church services:

> It's my conviction that the church needs to be out in the streets, be active outside the walls of the church. The church needs to preach about things that are happening in people's lives. This got me into trouble. Los Zetas arrived at my house, located 8 km outside Ciudad Victoria, one night and wanted to take me with them. They see the church as their worst enemy. (Interview 6)

The pastor escaped reprisal because the gang members were suddenly called away by their leadership. A pastor from Ciudad Valles, known for his outspoken views on drug consumption, was similarly threatened with kidnapping. (Interview 25).

Intimidation of vocal critics affects actively practicing Christians, but certain other actors too: there are numerous reports of Mexican human rights activists and journalists who suffer human rights abuses as a result of their work. We, therefore, characterize it as a *medium specific* threat: the specificity lies in the moral authority of Christian leaders and their influence on their congregation,

[44] James Bell and Neha Sahgal, Pew Research Center, Religion in Latin America: Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region (2014), https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/ sites/7/2014/11/Religion-in-Latin-America-11-12-PM-full-PDF.pdf.

[45] Paul Freston, Evangelicals and politics in asia, africa, and latin america (2001).

which is perceived as particularly threatening by crime syndicates. The "prophetic voice" of the church as a denouncer of injustice makes Christians especially vulnerable.

The threat of pressure on social initiatives can constitute a high risk for Christians when such initiatives impinge on the area of influence of criminal organizations. Drug rehabilitation programs are particularly targeted by criminal organizations as threats to their business.[46] The director of such a program in Monterrey received threats for accepting former *Zetas*. (Interview 8). A bloody attack in June 2010 on a drug rehabilitation clinic in Villa Nueva killed fifteen patients and social workers and an additional five passers-by. Similar attacks occurred in neighboring states in 2009.[47] Likewise, offering alternatives to youngsters in areas where the cartels recruit constitutes a threat to their power and their business. The founder of the aforementioned football team explained how it competed with the cartels:

> You could become member if you had good grades in school. All these boys came from dysfunctional families which made them easy targets for criminal gangs wishing to recruit them. Some of these boys had already been recruited as *halcones*. These boys also became part of the team and no longer wanted to work for the criminal gangs. (Interview with Daniel Pérez, name changed for security reasons.)

The cartel launched a comprehensive set of threats to try and stop the football team. According to the pastor, "they have called my home, my cell phone, my wife, and the elders of the church. They have left threatening notes on the door of the church." (Interview 2). Generally, chaplaincy in prisons and youth work directly threatens the market and influence of drug cartels, and therefore, also increases the vulnerability of those who engage in such work. (Interview 7). Recent reports also indicate that church leaders and their families who lend support to immigrants are often victims of reprisals because their activity threatens the operations of crime syndicates.[48] Unlike

the threats resulting from speaking out, as Christians, against injustice, we consider the threats resulting from social initiatives as *low specificity* threats. Any person engaging in activities in the social, cultural, and government spheres, regardless of their religious conviction or motive, is vulnerable to threats from organized crime.[49]

---

[46] Torres, *supra* note 43.

[47] Charles Torres, *Sangriento Ataque a Clínica Cristiana de Rehabilitación de Adictos en México*, Noticia Cristiana (June 21, 2010), https://noticiacristiana.com/policialjudicial/2010/06/sangriento-ataque-a-clinica-cristiana-de-rehabilitacion-de-adictos-en-mexico.html.

[48] *Cártel del Noreste Secuestra Joven Pastor*, *supra* note 32; *Protegió a Unos Migrantes Para que no los Secuestraran y se lo Llevaron a él*, *supra* note 33.

[49] International Crisis Group, *Peña Nieto's Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico* (Mar. 19, 2013), https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/pena-nieto-s-challenge-criminal-cartels-and-rule-law-mexico; Trejo & Ley, *supra* note 20.

Conclusions

In our field research in Northeast Mexico, we set out to observe human security threats to which religious individuals might be vulnerable without preconceived notions about what these threats could be. Through this openended approach, we discovered that in environments such as this, where there is weak rule of law and weak state capacity, individuals and communities are vulnerable to a panoply of infringements on religious freedom that are not commonly recognized as such. We showed that threats at the subnational level may have nothing to do with the quality of national legislation and that religious freedom may be threatened by non-state actors who are mostly not religiously motivated at all.

But most importantly, we focused on the role of religious behavior, demonstrating that beyond threats based on religious identity, there is a variety of risks people may run into because they translate their religiosity into types of behavior that involuntarily or intentionally challenge local powerholders. One reason why this behavioral dimension is often missed is that behaviors which are religiously inspired, and the vulnerabilities that stem from them, need not be exclusively religious. Most studies on religious persecution only observe threats that result *purely* from being religious, and therefore dismiss the heightened risks religious individuals and communities run as "collateral damage" in non-religious conflicts. As we have shown, vulnerabilities resulting from religious behavior can only be properly observed by letting go of a binary approach to the specificity of threats to religious freedom, and instead approaching it as a matter of degree.

It is important for academics, as well as practitioners engaging with freedom of religion, to move beyond a "minorities in states" thinking, giving more attention to non-state actors, to the particularities of the subnational level, and above all to religion as behavior. For human rights scholars, our approach and the findings from our case study offer points of departure for closer examination of how freedom of religion (and its violation) intersects with other rights in cases where active religious behavior is at stake. For

political scientists, the consequences of weak statehood and subnational variation in democracy for the regulation of religion warrant further inquiry and comparison: when organizations such as crime cartels or armed groups become the *de facto* authority, what are the consequences for individual and collective manifestations of religion?

A final interdisciplinary avenue for further research is the relation between religion and resilience: to what extent and in what ways do actively religious individuals and communities develop coping mechanisms in response to the human security threats that besiege them?

For vulnerable religious individuals and communities, and for organizations wishing to help them, various recommendations follow from our inquiry. The first is the need to be aware of and document the full scope of human security threats that religious individuals and communities face. As a human rights

manual states, "(w)ell-handled human rights information is basic to any struggle for justice and peace."[50]

If incidents were properly documented, vulnerable religious individuals and communities would benefit from much more visibility. And only if a careful record of specific violations is kept can it become possible to hold responsible parties accountable and compensate victims. Second, parallel to our suggestion that human rights scholars need to more closely examine the relationship between freedom of religion and other rights in relation to active religiosity, human rights organizations should be more attentive to vulnerability based on religion as a distinct analytical category. It should receive separate attention in human rights monitoring and take both the multidimensionality of religious freedom and the behavioral dimension of religion into account. Finally, having a clear picture of the threats to which religious individuals and communities are vulnerable can inform tactics that can contribute to making them more self-reliant and mitigate the risks they face.[51] Understanding the full panoply of threats that actively religious individuals and communities may face can enable the sharing and replication of coping mechanisms and redress.

[50] Burma Issues, Human Rights Information manual: tools for grassroots action (1994).

[51] Under Caesar's Sword, *supra* note 7, at 201.

Imprint

Address

c/o World Evangelical Alliance
Church Street Station
P. O. Box 3402
New York, NY 10008-3402
United States of America

Friedrichstr. 38
2nd Floor
53111 Bonn
Germany

International Director: Dr. Dennis P. Petri (V.i.S.d.P.)
Deputy Director: Dr. Kyle Wisdom
Executive Editor of the IJRF: Prof. Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham
President: Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Contact: info@iirf.global
Donations: https://iirf.global/donate/

Occasional journal with special reports, research projects, reprints and documentation published by VKW Culture and Science Publ.

Follow us:

International Institute
for Religious Freedom

International Institute for Religious Freedom

Bonn | Brussels | Cape Town
Colombo | Brasília | Delhi
Tübingen | Vancouver

iirf.global • info@iirf.global