

## Book Reviews

### **The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities**

Dennis P. Petri

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Over the past few decades, religious restrictions and hostilities have risen steadily around the world. In response, scholars and policy analysts have collected a considerable amount of cross-national data on religious persecution. Government officials now rely frequently on this evidence to advance policies to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief across the globe.

These parallel trends make Dennis Petri's monograph such a timely and valuable contribution. While Latin America remains the empirical focus of this provocative manuscript, its contribution extends well beyond a specific world region. Petri's analysis challenges us to rethink some of our most widely held assumptions about how we document and understand religious persecution in the first place.

The work is organized into two main parts. The introductory half of the volume reviews the study's theoretical approach and introduces a new assessment tool designed to specifically assess the vulnerability of religious minorities. Both the theory and method are motivated by a desire to redirect attention away from traditional conflict theories to a human security perspective. Petri argues that such a shift helps to overcome some of the most persistent limitations of existing religious freedom assessment tools, such as state-centric theories and data collection methods that overlook subnational and local variation in religious regulation and discrimination.

The empirical instrument Petri develops – the Religious Minorities Vulnerability Assessment Tool (RM-VAT) – is an especially valuable contribution in its own right. It offers a systematic method of evaluating the types and levels of threats faced by religious minorities across multiple spheres of society (e.g., social, business, political). As Petri notes, this tool should be seen as a complement to rather than a replacement for existing cross-national data collection methods.

The second half of the volume explores the empirical implications of the RM-VAT. Each case study provides a wealth of information based on primary data collection (through interviews) and secondary sources. The three empirical chapters

consider the vulnerability of actively practicing Christians in three Mexican states; the experience of Christian converts among the Nasa ethnic group in Colombia; and the situation faced by Christians in Cuba.

As a whole, the empirical chapters bring into focus both persecuted religious communities and persecutors who are often overlooked by existing global datasets, other empirical studies, and the popular media. For example, the analysis of Colombia draws attention to religious persecution within indigenous communities in the southwestern highlands of the country. The chapter on Mexico reveals the leading role organized crime plays in harassing religious minorities even though such incidents often go unreported to the authorities. The case studies also document a number of ways in which religious minorities have tried to remain resilient in the face of ongoing persecution.

The book concludes with a discussion of the scholarly and policy implications of the research, along with recommendations for religious minorities, faith-based organizations, and human rights agencies. Perhaps the most jolting proposal is Petri's call for Latin American civil society organizations to redouble, or in many cases initiate, efforts to more systematically document threats to religious minorities. As the study's empirical findings suggest, global datasets that consistently rank levels of religious discrimination in Latin America among the lowest in the world may not be capturing the full picture.

Of course, no single study can tell the whole story. Exactly how the RM-VAT might be integrated into cross-national data collection efforts, for instance, is a question left unanswered in this volume. Guidance on how to improve the rigor of data collection for the RM-VAT is also not as clear as it could be. Petri acknowledges that much of his analysis relies on anecdotal evidence gathered through interviews but does not explain in detail how triangulation might address this issue. Finally, all three empirical chapters focus on the persecution of Christians, a decision largely guided by the regional focus of the study. Still, the analysis could have benefited from more attention to other religious minorities, such as Jewish diaspora communities or the growing persecution of Muslim communities in Brazil, to show the broader reach of its claims.

These quibbles notwithstanding, Petri's study is to be commended for the questions it raises, the novel assessment tool it offers, and the attention it directs to subnational levels of religious persecution. It stands out as a valuable source for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who seek to develop a deeper understanding of local realities and context-specific, locally owned policies and practices that promote freedom of religion or belief for all.