The regulation of religion by organized crime

Conceptualization of an underexplored phenomenon through a case study in Northeast Mexico

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Abstract

Using evidence from field research in the Mexican states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, I argue that characteristic elements of the regulation of religion by authoritarian governments can be observed at the subnational level, imposed not by the state but by crime syndicates. The threats drug cartels make to religious groups can be reinterpreted as forms of "religious policy," such as interventions in the appointment of religious ministers, elimination of ministers who are critical of the drug trade, censorship of of sermons, imposition of curfews, application of "taxes" through protection rackets, and restrictions placed on charitable work.

Keywords regulation of religion, organized crime, religious freedom, active religious behavior, Mexico.

This study investigates the underexplored relationship between organized crime and religion.[2] It is generally assumed that since organized crime affects the whole population and has no particularly religious motives, it is not a relevant threat to religious groups. In any event, its influence on religious freedom is rarely considered. However, increasing empirical evidence suggests the vulnerability of religious groups to organized crime. Several narrative reports on Mexico have stressed the impact of organized crime on religious groups (Sotelo Aguilar 2017; Freston 2018; Gómez Chico Spamer, González Alvarez, Perera Calzada, and Porras Sánchez 2018). The *International Religious Freedom* report on Mexico by the US State Department (2015) mentions that "priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country continued to be targeted and received extortion attempts, death

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threats, and intimidation, often from organized criminal groups."[3] In hearings before the US Congress, "narco-persecution" in Mexico has been denounced.[4] Awareness of the vulnerability of Christian workers in the face of organized crime is also increasing in the broader society. An article in *El Universal*, one of Mexico's leading newspapers, was entitled "Organized crime is intolerant of priests."[5]

In this study, I argue that characteristic elements of the regulation of religion by authoritarian governments are applied at the subnational level by crime syndicates. I first provide a brief overview of what regulation of religion in non-democracies entails, based on a review of pertinent literature. I then adapt this framework to non-state actors, discussing the regulation of religion by organized crime in northeast Mexico. My analysis draws on more than 40 interviews with Christians in the region who have suffered human rights abuses at the hands of organized crime. I show that the threats drug cartels make to religious groups can be reinterpreted as forms of "religious policy," such as interventions in the appointment of religious ministers, the elimination of ministers critical of the drug trade, censorship of the contents of sermons, the imposition of curfews, the application of "taxes" through protection rackets, and restrictions placed on charitable work.

1. State regulation of religion in non-democracies

This section addresses the most relevant characteristics of state regulation of religion, an important topic of interest for scholars who specialize in the relation between religion and politics. In the following section, I will show that non-state actors such as organized crime, when they take over state functions, use similar policies to regulate religion.

Regulation of religion encompasses "all government laws, policies, and practices that limit, regulate, or control the majority religion in a state, or all religions in a state" (Fox 2013:41). In this regard, two preliminary remarks are in order. First, every state, whether democratic or authoritarian, has some form of religious policy and regulates religion in some way. In fact, states can and do regulate a great number of dimensions of religion. The Religion and State (RAS) dataset elabo-

[3] Because the US State Department reports are the primary input for the Pew Research Center indexes and the Religion and State dataset, this type of observation is taken into account in their measures of social hostilities, although organized crime is not specifically coded.

[4] Congressional hearing on "The Worldwide Persecution of Christians," Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, US Congress, 11 February 2014; Congressional hearing on "Freedom of Expression in the Americas," Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, US Congress, 17 September 2015.

[5] "El crimen organizado es intolerante con los sacerdotes," *El Universal*, 4 January 2015; "Asesinados 44 sacerdotes en los últimos 27 años: Iglesia," *La Prensa*, 19 January 2017.

rated by Jonathan Fox describes government involvement in religion through 132 variables, which can be complemented by 9 detailed variables measuring certain religious policies.

Second, the nature of state regulation of religion can be more or less restrictive for religious groups. This is a central point emphasized by Fox (2016) and Philpott (2019), among others. Often, religious policy differentiates between religion in general, the majority religion and some or all minority religions. Major differences can be observed between democratic and authoritarian states, but also within each category. State regulation of religion can range from simple administrative requirements such as the registration of religious organizations, which is standard in most democracies, to extensive state intervention in or even the complete outlawing of particular religious practices or groups. The latter is more common in authoritarian states, especially those that enforce a strict anti-religion policy (such as communist states) or favor one religion to the detriment of others (such as theocratic states). The most extreme forms of regulation of religion occur in authoritarian countries that either exhibit an anti-religious emphasis or enforce a religious political ideology.

2. Adaptation of the state regulation of religion framework to non-state actors

Most studies of religious regulation treat the state as the unit of analysis and rarely consider the possibility that non-state actors may regulate religion in a manner similar to governments. Focusing on the subnational level allows one to uncover dimensions of religious freedom, including the regulation of religion, that would otherwise go unnoticed. The existence of subnational areas characterized by weak rule of law and weak state capacity has obvious implications for the enforcement of democratic rights, including religious freedom.

Not all non-state actors that create vulnerability for religious groups can be described as regulating religion. For example, if a militant religious group attacks a member of another religious group, this does not mean that the actor is enacting and enforcing some form of religious policy. For non-state actors to engage in systematic regulation of religion, they must have a certain amount of control over territory and thus act as the *de facto* political authority. Sadly, this has been the case with organized crime, specifically the Los Zetas drug cartel, in northeast Mexico.

Three reasons can be suggested as to why organized crime cares about religion. The first is economic. Churches are often seen as revenue centers by drug cartels because they receive large amounts of money in offerings. They are easy targets for extortion or for kidnappings seeking ransom because of their generalized unresponsiveness when it comes to defending themselves against threats (few

churches hire private security, for example) and because they are easy to enter as most churches want to appear welcoming to visitors.[6]

The second explanation of organized crime's interest in religion lies in considerations of power politics: certain forms of religious behavior threaten their influence. The vulnerability of actively practicing Christians is highest when they display active forms of religious behavior such as evangelism or social work, which pose a direct threat to the influence of organized crime. The moral authority of churches, the large numbers of people they attract and their influence in the community explain why Christian leaders are particularly affected.[7]

As numerous scholars have pointed out, religion and the state can be viewed as competing sources of legitimacy (Weber 1919; Habermas 2006; Scolnicov 2011; Buijs, Sunier and Versteeg 2013; Fox 2013). In northeast Mexico, religion also competes with organized crime. Religious leaders are vulnerable because religion is an alternative, especially for young men, to a life in the drug cartels.

Besides the moral authority of Christian leaders, organized crime is wary of the unique mobilization capacity, international connections, resources and societal presence of religious groups,[8] just as the state is in many non-democracies (Goldenziel 2009; Koesel 2014; Fox 2015). Like states, criminal organizations sometimes seek to control or co-opt religious groups to claim legitimacy for themselves.[9]

Organized crime is not concerned with all forms of religion, but primarily with active religious behavior. Indeed, most expressions of religious identity, such as owning a Bible, confessing a particular creed, praying privately, displaying religious symbols, and listening to religious music, do not make Christians vulnerable in this context. But more active forms of religious behavior do. As one interviewee put it, "Because of their way of life, Christians are naturally more exposed to suffering from organized crime."[10]

Finally, organized crime sometimes has a religious motive. In the case of the Los Zetas drug cartel, the perpetration of extremely cruel acts of violence serve more than an instrumental purpose and can be interpreted in relation to their adherence to the *Santa Muerte* [Holy Death] cult.

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6 Interview with MX21 (2014).

7 Just as in various areas of Mexico, criminal organizations in El Salvador extort money from and assault large churches, but there gangs seem to respect smaller churches that are genuinely concerned with social matters such as relieving extreme poverty (Brenneman 2012, 2014; Cruz and Rosen 2020, 2022).

8 These characteristics also set religious leaders apart from other types of actors, such as journalists or human rights activists, who may otherwise face very similar threats.

9 There are plenty of anecdotal accounts of Mexican cartels providing assistance to religious organizations.

10 Interview with MX14 (2014).

These factors disprove the implicit consensus that religion is not singled out for opposition by organized crime, or at least they show that the relationship is more complex. Organized crime does take direct aim at religious groups, but only when expressions of religion threaten their interests or when religious organizations are seen as revenue centers.

3. Case study selection and methods

The time frame for this case study encompassed the second half of President Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa's term (2009-2012) and the first half of President Enrique Peña Nieto's term (2012-2015), during the height of the *Los Zetas* (the Z's) insurgency. Los Zetas were the dominant drug cartel in northeast Mexico at the time.

In 1999, the Gulf Cartel began to recruit members of the Mexican Army Special Forces to serve as its military armed wing. This led to the creation of Los Zetas, a particularly bloodthirsty but extremely well-trained division composed initially of deserted army commandos that "brought in a series of unprecedented tactics: the use of paramilitary hit squads; widespread attacks on police; and mass kidnappings" (Grillo 2012: 94). Eventually, Los Zetas broke away from the Gulf Cartel and became its greatest rival (Grayson 2007, 2014). Los Zetas were considered the most powerful and the most violent cartel in North and Central America after they overtook the Sinaloa Cartel and the Gulf Cartel in terms of military sophistication and territorial control (ICG 2013; Grayson 2014). All three cartels continue to dispute control of the Nuevo Laredo area.

When President Felipe Calderón took office in 2006 and launched a nationwide "war on drugs," high-intensity crime increased to previously unseen rates. Both the ongoing turf wars between the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas and the government's declaration of war on the drug cartels precipitated widespread violence (ICG 2013; IACHR 2015; Rosen and Zepeda 2016). In 2012, a homicide rate of 46.9 per 100,000 inhabitants was recorded in Tamaulipas, more than double the national rate of 22.2.[11] In Nuevo León, the homicide rate was 38.6. Rosen and Zepeda (2016) reported a total of 132,135 homicides in Mexico from 2006 to 2012, of which 5,943 occurred in Nuevo León and 4,756 in Tamaulipas. Of a total of 49,415 "narco-executions" by government security forces throughout Mexico during the Calderón administration (2006-2012), 3,924 happened in Nuevo León and 2,178 in Tamaulipas with respectively 5.1 and 3.4 million inhabitants (IAHCR 2015).

For this study, I carried out three one-week field trips to the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, both of which border the US state of Texas, between 2014 and 2016. During these trips, I interviewed over 40 people from a wide range of backgrounds: church leaders, police officers, social workers, youth workers, jour-

[11] "En 2010 hubo 24,374 homicidios: INEGI," *Expansión*, 28 July 2011.

nalists, shopkeepers and former cartel members. The interviewees were selected based on their background – most had been victims of hostilities as a result of organized crime or were firsthand observers of such hostilities – and their characteristics as actively practicing Christians (purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling). All interviews were open-ended in nature and sought to identify the threats to which the interviewees considered themselves vulnerable.[12]

4. Case study of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas

At particular moments and locations, Mexican drug cartels such as Los Zetas, the Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel have exercised a number of prerogatives that constitute traditional functions of the state. This has been possible because of the state's intrinsic weakness in those areas, due to inefficiency and corruption. Drug organizations have taken advantage of and aggravated that weakness (see Shirk and Wallman 2015; Ríos 2015; Chabat 2010; Correa-Cabrera 2021; Watt and Zepeda 2012).

The emergence of the drug cartels in Mexico has been documented extensively (Olson, Shirk and Selee 2010; Grayson 2010; Grillo 2012, 2016; Garay Salamanca and Salcedo-Albarán 2012; Schedler 2014, 2015; Rosen and Zepeda 2016; Heinle, Ferreira and Shirk 2017). A full discussion of this history is beyond the scope of this study, but to explain briefly, undemocratic subnational regimes can arise when drug traffickers take advantage of structural political vacuums to implement *de facto* authoritarian regimes through the cooptation of local authorities and the infiltration of political institutions (Garay Salamanca and Salcedo-Albarán 2012: 316; IACHR 2015; Rosen and Zepeda 2016).

Criminal organizations wreak major havoc on the people, including religious groups, in the territories where they function. Security forces have been incapable of restoring law and order in the state. "When the military are present, things normalize but when they leave, [Los Zetas] pick up where they left," said a pastor in a rural area of Tamaulipas.[13] A police officer from Monterrey explains, "Previous military successes in Monterrey just drove Los Zetas away to Reynosa and Ciudad Victoria."[14] Below, I discuss evidence from my fieldwork on how the Los Zetas drug cartel regulates religion, drawing on and adapting Sarkissian's categories of religious regulation (2015).

4.1 Religious observance

Depending on the location and the time, in practice church services are restricted by the generalized context of insecurity and impunity and by the orders of drug car-

[12] More information about my data collection can be found on the research portal of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam: https://bit.ly/3rvCH4M.

[13] Interview with MX02 (2014).

[14] Interview with MX03 (2014).

tels. The right being violated in both cases is freedom of assembly, an important dimension of religious freedom. Any type of large gathering is always at risk of being interrupted and attacked for extortion or kidnapping for ransom, but this especially applies to church meetings which are visible, recurrent and generally easy to enter.

In many areas, church leaders have decided not to organize nighttime church services for security reasons, and in some areas they have held no church services at all. A pastor from Monterrey said, "At the peak of the violence caused by Los Zetas in Nuevo Léon in 2010 and 2011, many churches decided to eliminate services at night because of the risks that this posed. We could only hold church services in daylight."[15] A pastor from Ciudad Victoria in Tamaulipas, referring to the same period, stated:

> In 2010 and 2011 we lived through two years of unprecedented violence. We suffered many kidnappings, extortions and other abuses. The police were corrupt, and almost 100% were involved with crime. We had no place to go. We stopped organizing church meetings at night, and church attendance decreased considerably. In 2011, we wanted to organize a large prayer service in a 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.[16]

In some cases, services were suspended by a direct drug cartel order. "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 other option than to obey this order, because they are the real authority in this city."[17]

The financial sustainability of some churches is also threatened by these attacks. As the level of threat increases, fewer people attend church services, thereby reducing church income. A pastor from Ciudad Victoria recalled, "Most of the big tithers [i.e. people paying up to 10 percent of their income to the church] left because of the extortions."[18] Another minister said, "The income of many churches went down because we are collecting much smaller 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* [protection racket (literally: floor rights)]. Because I did not want to pay, I was forced to close this business."[19]

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[15] Interview with MX07 (2014).

[16] Interview with MX06 (2014). Similar views were expressed in other interviews, such as by MX09 (2014).

[17] Interview with MX01 (2014).

[18] Interview with MX06 (2014).

[19] Interview with MX01 (2014).

Church services were banned in certain areas, and some churches have reportedly been closed by orders of drug cartels for not paying *derecho de piso*.[20] Missionary activities are also restricted in some areas. Moreover, some individuals have reportedly been prohibited from attending church services or told they must report to the drug cartels whenever they visit a particular church.

Although this regulation of religious observance does not extend to matters such as religious dress, dietary laws or the celebration of religious holidays, the insecurity caused by organized crime restricts many forms of attendance of religious services, directly affecting their openness, hours and attendance level.

4.2 Places of worship

Organized crime also restricts the freedom to administer places of worship, which includes access to these facilities as well as their construction, leasing or repairing. Access to places of worship is directly reduced when the faithful are concerned about the risk of extortion, kidnapping and other assaults, or because of the curfews noted above. Reduced attendance at religious services translates into lower tithes, compounds the costs of extortion and ransom, and burdens the capacity of religious organizations to maintain their places of worship.

Theft of church property has occurred with some frequency. A pastor reported, "Attacks on churches happen. Los Zetas sometimes walk in to steal and don't need to use violence because there is no security."[21] A police officer in Guadalupe, Nuevo León also highlighted the robbery of church property as one of the major crimes in his jurisdiction.[22] Many church robberies are deliberately not reported. Catholic leaders indicate that they often prefer not to report the crimes to avoid stimulating panic among their members. Moreover, no official records are kept on the theft of church property.

Despite the absence of official records, a search of local media sources in the two states revealed that the theft of church property was relatively frequent. Indeed, the Catholic diocese of Tamaulipas announced in 2014 that it had decided to install surveillance systems after frequent church robberies in Ciudad Madero and Tampico.[23] A spokesperson for the Matamoros diocese, also in the state of Tamaulipas, reported that robberies of churches and parishes "have increased."[24] A priest from Reynosa reported the robbery of musical instruments and a sound system from

[20] Interview with MX08 (2014).
[21] Interview with MX07 (2014).
[22] Interview with MX03 (2014).
[23] "Iglesias instalan sistema de vigilancia," *Milenio*, 13 December 2014.
[24] "Al alza robos en iglesias, no hay denuncias para no generar pánico, dice la Diócesis," *Mundo Tamaulipas*, 21 October 2015.

his parish.[25] Protestant churches in Matamoros made similar reports.[26] In 2012, a group of journalists requested the inclusion of theft of church property in police statistics, due to the frequency of this crime.[27]

It is difficult to determine the motives for the robberies of church property. Most reports speculate that the perpetrators are drug addicts who need valuable objects to sell or trade for drugs. Protestant churches are often targeted because they are usually closed for three or more days a week, making them easier targets. Catholic churches are generally open to visitors, so thieves can easily enter them (Sotelo Aguilar 2017).

4.3 Religious laws

Although most drug cartels do not have a religious motive for regulating religion, the *Santa Muerte* (Holy Death) cult has a widespread following among the members of drug cartels, especially Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, both headquartered in Tamaulipas. Santa Muerte is an expression of Mexican folk religion that revolves around the *Niña Blanca* (White Girl), a skeletal grim reaper image representing "a popular spirit who cares for the poor and downtrodden" and who is believed to have the power to "deflect bullets" (Grillo 2012:191-196). There is also a very large industry of Santa Muerte souvenirs that are sold to nationals and tourists in large quantities. According to anthropologists, Santa Muerte "reflects the nation's age-old fascination with the deceased, as shown in its Day of the Dead. The skeleton could even be a resurgence of an old Aztec deity called Mictecacihuatl or the Lady of the Land of the Dead" (Grillo 2012:195).

Santa Muerte is venerated by members of drug cartels, in particular by Los Zetas. Grillo and others, including former members of Los Zetas whom I interviewed for this research, asserted that the Santa Muerte cult inspired them to extreme cruelty, such as beheadings using axes, castrations, and other brutal acts.[28] Many Christian leaders affirm that the violence of Los Zetas is inspired by Santa Muerte.[29] A female pastor near Tampico, Tamaulipas declared, "Los Zetas kill as a form of satanic sacrifice."[30]

Interviewees confirmed that the Santa Muerte cult is a central element of the identity of Los Zetas and a justification for their activities. Los Zetas have forced various churches to pay tribute to Santa Muerte and have retaliated violently when

[25] "Roban instrumentos y sonido de la iglesia," *El Mañana*, 23 January 2015.
[26] "Afirman que adictos roban iglesias de Matamoros," *Horacero*, 9 June 2013.
[27] "Robo a iglesias, delito no contemplado en estadísticas de la autoridad," *La Policiaca*, 12 June 2012.
[28] Interviews with MX06, MX01, MX07 and MX08 (2014).
[29] "Recent Santa Muerte Spiritual Conflict Trends", *Small Wars Journal,* 16 January 2014.
[30] Interview with MX09 (2014).

church leaders have refused to host their shrines, statues and symbols or to participate in the worship of this deity, such as through masses dedicated to Santa Muerte. The forced observance of Santa Muerte rituals is a major infringement upon church autonomy, which particularly affects Catholic congregations. When church leaders refuse to collaborate, they can face violent reprisals. "It is believed that one of the priests assassinated in December [2013] was eliminated because he refused to celebrate a mass dedicated to Santa Muerte in his church," a news service reported.[31]

4.4 Conversion

In general, changes in religious identity do not cause reprisals by drug cartels, but cartel members who convert to Christianity and consequently abandon their cartel risk being killed. Often, converted cartel members also seek to convert other members, making them vulnerable to threats.

A pastor from Nuevo León shared a story about a youth who had left Los Zetas after becoming a Christian and 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 [Tamaulipas]. He disappeared. We never heard from him again."[32] Another pastor recalled a former Zeta who converted to Christianity in prison: "Two 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 his funeral."[33] The pastor added, "Criminals who convert to Christianity are murdered. What the cartels are afraid of is that they may lose their leaders if they are exposed to the Gospel." The media have also reported violent accounts of what happens to former cartel members who convert to Christianity. In one instance, a former cartel member was given the remains of his daughter and wife on a tray as a punishment for converting and leaving his cartel.[34]

4.5 Proselytizing

Drug cartels do not restrict proselytizing in general, unless it aims at cartel members. Christian workers who engage in this kind of activity can expect death threats. One pastor reported: "One night we wanted to organize an evangelistic campaign in Linares [Nuevo León], where many cartel members live. We had to cancel this activity due to the risk of gunfire and extortions."[35] A missionary shared this report:

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[31] "México: narco-persecución contra cristianos", *Noticiero Milamex*, 11 March 2014.

[32] Interview with MX08 (2014).

[33] Interview with MX07 (2014).

[34] "Conversión de 'narcos': posible explicación a los ataques a centros de rehabilitación en México," *Noticia Cristiana*, 25 June 2010.

[35] Interview with MX07 (2014).

> In Nuevo León, 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. When I asked him for more information, he refused to say anything. His uncle is too afraid to speak to me. I was also told about a team of five people who left for an evangelistic mission to the mountains of Matamoros [where Los Zetas hide]. None of them came back. I'm afraid they were kidnapped and killed, because no one asked for ransom to be paid.[36]

4.6 Discriminatory registrations and bans

Crime syndicates in the two states regulate religion through protection rackets, which are used both to finance drug cartels' operations and to silence or even eradicate religious groups whose behavior affects their interests. The effect of this form of extortion is similar to discriminatory registration laws in non-democracies.

Drug cartels implemented a sophisticated "tax" collection system in the territories under their control, commonly known as *derecho de piso* (floor rights) or *venta de protección* (protection racket).[37] They charge churches or businesses for the right to remain open or to organize public meetings[38] (similar to a public license), or they collect a percentage of the proceeds of a business (just like an income tax).[39]

The phenomenon of illegal charges is the most common form of extortion in northeast Mexico. Criminal organizations make all kinds of threats, including the kidnapping of family members, if the extorted entity refuses to pay. Victims often cannot report the threats due to the lack of legal security, since the police are also corrupt (Schedler 2015).

It is difficult to assess the extent of these charges because many if not most such payments are not reported; however, interviewees indicate that this is a massive phenomenon affecting all churches.[40] A female pastor in the coast city of Tampico said, "Various pastors pay *derecho de piso*. Some pastors had to leave the city because they feared for their lives. I personally know the husband of a pastor who had to flee."[41] A former drug addict and trafficker who now runs a drug rehabilitation program in Monterrey, whom I interviewed (for security reasons) in a parking lot on a crowded street, asserted that all pastors in the area pay *derecho de piso*, "including the president of the council of

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[36] Interview with MX23 (2014).

[37] Colombian criminal organizations have a similar practice to *derecho de piso*, known as *vacuna* (vaccine).

[38] "Impresentable: Pastores de Michoacán deben pagar a narcos para realizar eventos masivos en sus iglesias," *Noticia Cristiana*, 12 April 2010.

[39] "Pago de "derecho de piso" se extiende en todo el país," *El Universal*, 4 October 2011.

[40] Interview with MX11 (2014).

[41] Interview with MX09 (2014).

pastors of Monterrey, although he would deny it."[42] Another pastor, a converted former member of Los Zetas, told me, "Many pastors, including pastors of very large churches, pay *derecho de piso*, although nobody wants to speak about it."[43]

The consequences of not paying the requested *derecho de piso* are heavy. Some churches and businesses have been closed.[44] A Christian educational institution in the city of Veracruz, located south of Tampico, was burned after its leaders refused to pay *derecho de piso*.[45] In other cases, the refusers are beaten, raped, kidnapped or killed. I spoke with several members of a pastoral family who decided to leave their hometown of Ciudad Victoria and move to another state because they were threatened with death if they did not pay a certain amount of money.[46]

The fact that actively practicing Christians are easily identifiable increases their vulnerability to this threat. The visibility of church services, for example, makes churches easy targets for intimidation. "It is obvious that organized crime monitors the activities of churches and of Christians. They take advantage of any public activity by Christians with the aim of extorting and generating income," one interviewee said.[47] Another interviewee described a raid by Los Zetas on a Monterrey church during a service. They pointed a gun at the pastor's head and forced the congregation to pay a certain amount for his life to be spared.[48] Indeed, churches are seen as attractive revenue centers by organized crime. A police officer commented, "Christian churches collect a lot of money. The bad guys know this. They need money to finance their war: arms, mines, gas."[49] Even though the threat is greatest for the larger churches, all congregations are vulnerable to extortions and kidnappings for ransom (Sotelo Aguilar 2017).

4.7 Clerical appointments

The Mexican Episcopal Conference has called Mexico "the most dangerous country in the world to exercise priesthood," citing more than 500 threats and 31 killings of priests in the past decade; these cases are mostly related to crime.[50] A Protestant news outlet also reported in 2013 that Mexican churches suffer constant criminal attacks.[51]

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[42] Interview with MX08 (2014) and MX12 (2015).
[43] Interview with MX07 (2014).
[44] Interview with MX01 (2014).
[45] Interview with MX09 (2014).
[46] Interview with MX16 (2014).
[47] Interview with MX15 (2016).
[48] Interview with MX08 (2014).
[49] Interview with MX03 (2014).
[50] "Denuncia la CEM amenazas contra sacerdotes; pide afrontar inseguridad," *Proceso*, 11 April 2013; "Crimen acecha a sacerdotes de la Iglesia Católica," *Excelsior*, 11 January 2014; "26 sacerdotes asesinados 2012–2018." *Centro Católico Multimedial*, 16 December 2018.
[51] "Iglesias de México denuncian que sufren constantes ataques criminales," *Noticia Cristiana*, 15 January 2013.

In the state of Nuevo León, two American Protestant missionaries were killed in 2012 by drug traffickers,[52] and three Catholic priests were killed in Tamaulipas between 1990 and 2016.[53]

Above, I discussed kidnapping for ransom as a means for drug cartels to make money; it also gives the cartels a way to intervene indirectly in clerical appointments. Indeed, the threat of kidnapping for ransom is used to intimidate church leaders whom the drug cartels see as a threat because of the content of their preaching or their moral influence. Drug cartels may also engage in kidnappings as intimidation or reprisal for not cooperating with a previous requirement. A particularly cruel account was shared by an evangelical pastor in a crime-torn Tamaulipas city:

> A pastor friend of mine was abducted by a criminal gang that was part of a satanic cult. His family was ordered to pay a ransom. 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.[54]

A pastor from the state of San Luis Potosí, located south of Nuevo León, described the threats he was facing: "My wife and I have been receiving calls in which we were threatened with kidnapping. I told my children that if I'm kidnapped, they should never pay any ransom. We can only trust in God."[55] Another church leader in the same state told of a pastor who was under threat of kidnapping. A young member of his congregation begged Los Zetas not to kidnap this pastor, and he was taken instead. After a few days, he was released. The church leader who related the story could not confirm whether a ransom had been paid for his release.[56]

The scope of the kidnappings is difficult to assess quantitatively because most cases are not reported, but there is no doubt that churches are greatly affected by this threat. A pastor of a large church in Ciudad Victoria told me, "Last Sunday I asked all people to raise their hands if they had a family member or friend who was currently abducted. 129 people raised their hands."[57] I heard many similar testi-

[52] "Asesinan en NL a 2 misioneros estadounidenses," *El Universal*, 1 February 2012.
[53] "15 sacerdotes caídos," *Centro Católico Multimedial*, 28 September 2016.
[54] Interview with MX01 (2014).
[55] Interview with MX21 (2014).
[56] Interview with MX25 (2014).
[57] Interview with MX13 (2014).

monies in my interviews,[58] and other reports further confirm the high frequency of kidnapping of Christian leaders for ransom.[59]

4.8 Religious associations

Christians who set up religious associations face major threats, especially if their initiatives infringe on areas of influence of criminal organizations. Drug rehabilitation programs, chaplaincies in prisons, and youth work are targeted by criminal organizations because they directly threaten the drug trafficking business, or as a reprisal measure for the conversion to Christianity of former drug traffickers.[60] The director of such a program in Monterrey shared that he received threats from Los Zetas for accepting former Zetas into his program.[61] A bloody attack in June 2010 on a drug rehabilitation clinic in Villa Nueva, Tamaulipas killed fifteen patients and social workers, plus an additional five passers-by. Similar attacks occurred in neighboring states in 2009.[62]

Initiatives that provide meaningful alternatives for youths at risk who would otherwise be potential targets for recruitment as *halcones* (informants or errand runners for the drug cartels) are also vulnerable to threats. A pastor in a Tamaulipas village, who had set up a very popular soccer team for boys under age twelve, explained:

> You could become a 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*, watchers for criminal gangs to warn them of police presence. These boys also became part of the team and no longer wanted to work for the criminal gangs. This resulted in one of them, a 10-year-old boy, being murdered. The narcos constantly threaten me to stop with the soccer team. I must deal with threats on my life on a frequent basis. They have called my home, my cellphone, my wife, and the elders of the church. They have left threatening notes on the door of the church.[63]

4.9 Political speech

There are numerous reports of Mexican human rights activists and journalists suffering human rights abuses as a result of their work. This is also true of Christian leaders whose moral authority is perceived as a threat by organized crime. The in-

[58] Interviews with MX22 (2011), MX18, MX09, MX14, MX19, MX01 and MX21 (2014).

[59] Interviews with MX22, MX24 (2012) and MX23 (2014); "A Priest of the Diocese of Ciudad Victoria Has Been Missing Since November, Violence Does Not Calm Down," *Agenzia Fides*, 7 January 2014.

[60] "Conversión de 'narcos.'"

[61] Interview with MX07 and MX08 (2014).

[62] "Sangriento ataque a clínica cristiana de rehabilitación de adictos en México," *Noticia Cristiana*, 21 June 2010.

[63] Interview with soccer club director and two team members (2014).

terpretations of Christianity that seek to promote spiritual and social transformation can easily conflict with the interests of drug cartels. Speaking out against injustice publicly – whether it is violence, drug consumption, drug trafficking, corruption or organized crime – from the pulpit or in another setting risks provoking intimidation by drug cartels, in the form of beatings, attacks on the houses of church leaders, or even killings. Christian news reporters have also been killed because they exposed the activities of organized crime.[64]

One pastor explained that his house had been attacked by a drug cartel.[65] Most interviewees indicated 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 of a church in Ciudad Madero, Tamaulipas.[66] A pastor in Ciudad Victoria seemed to be among the few who publicly denounced injustice at church services. He stated:

> It's my conviction that the church needs to be out in the streets, 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. [He got out of the situation because the assailants were suddenly called away by their leadership.] They see the church as their worst enemy.[67]

A development worker reported:

> In the north of Mexico, organized crime effectively persecutes believers. Narcos threaten pastors to leave certain areas or demand payment of *derecho de piso*. This is because biblical teachings forbid consumption and distribution of drugs and/or corruption, and this affects their business. Also, massive Christian gatherings have been forbidden by organized crime.[68]

5. Conclusions

In this study, I have argued that the framework of state regulation of religion can be adapted to interpret the interaction between organized crime and religion. Drug cartels effectively regulate aspects of religion, either because they view religion as

[64] Interview with MX07 (2014).
[65] Interview with MX06 (2014)
[66] Interview with MX14 (2014).
[67] Interview with MX06 (2014).
[68] Interview with MX22 (2011).

a source of revenue or to defend their interests, contradicting the conventional wisdom that organized crime is not particularly concerned with religion.[69]

Not all aspects of religion commonly regulated by non-democracies are regulated by organized crime. Organized crime does not regulate matters related to religious speech (unlike political speech), religious education, the observance of religious holidays (unless they involve large gatherings of people or are used to criticize criminal elements), religious laws related to life events such as marriage or burials, use of religious dress, or formal registration requirements for religious organizations. Drug cartels are generally not interested in religion itself but in behavior inspired by religious convictions that challenges their interests.

During my fieldwork, I did not find any evidence that organized crime enforces a religious policy concerning religious speech or publications, religious education, religious political parties or access to political office, even though there may be instances where organized crime has an indirect impact on these matters due to its influence over political processes and electoral campaigns. Although not all forms of state regulation of religion apply to organized crime, many do, thereby justifying my interpretation of the restrictions placed on religious groups by organized crime as forms of non-state religious policy.

Beyond the importance of considering the role of non-state actors such as organized crime, this study also underlines the pertinence of focusing on active religious practice as a source of vulnerability, instead of simply on religious identity (see Birdsall and Beaman 2020). Indeed, by focusing on active religious practice – instead of on religion in general, which would not have allowed me to observe any variation – I was able to identify specific forms of regulation of religion by organized crime.

This is relevant first from a conceptual perspective. It implies that non-religious motives such as greed, which is evidently the main driver of organized crime, can lead criminal elements 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, it has not been explicitly established in relation to religious groups, partly because the distinction between religious identity and religious behavior is not usually made, and also because religious freedom monitoring instruments generally look for religious motives for the "persecution" of religious groups. Consequently, non-religious motives for threats

[69] Government regulation of religion is generally assumed to be detrimental to religious freedom. In northeast Mexico, however, the lack of state capacity enables cartels to exercise power over religion. In such cases, government inaction might not necessarily be a good thing. Religious freedom might fare best not in situations of no restrictions, but rather where states have ample capacity to regulate and where they choose wise degrees and types of regulation.

to religious minorities defined by its behavioral characteristics are overlooked (see Petri 2022).

Furthermore, within the broader debate about whether violence in civil conflicts is indiscriminate (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2007; Schedler 2015; Bartman 2018), this study provides an additional argument for the claim that it is not necessarily indiscriminate. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that it is difficult to distinguish regulatory strategies designed by criminal groups from mere consequences that the violent environment they generate imposes on religious practices such as church attendance and proselytizing.

More research on the relation between organized crime and religion is needed. My findings in Mexico could be generalized to other cases. Similar conclusions may apply to other crime-ridden 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 consider organized crime in sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan or even US inner cities as potentially affected by the same pattern. Even though these cases of widespread criminal activity are well-known, they have not yet been studied through the lens of regulation of religion.

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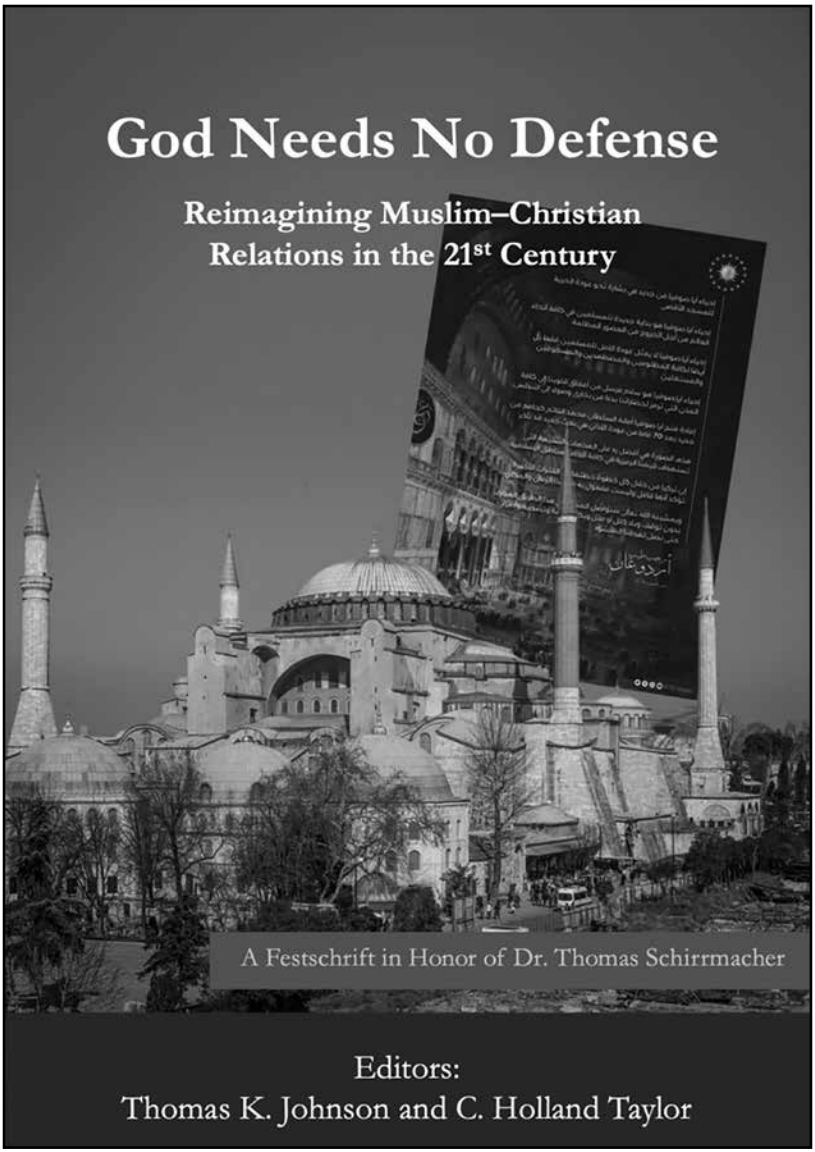

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