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**Ministering to the Victims of Violence:  
Christianity in Latin America in Dictatorship and Democracy**

*Concept Paper*

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## *Executive Summary*

In 2012-13, the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) at American University (AU) will carry out a two-year program of research, publication and policy dialogues focused on how religious institutions have understood and confronted violence in Latin America under dictatorship and democracy. Under military regimes that governed across most of the region during the 1970s and 1980s, Christian churches in various countries defended victims and denounced perpetrators of widespread state-sponsored violence. Although the overall picture was mixed, the scholarly literature rightly highlights the break from traditional accommodation by Latin American churches to conservative political regimes. Religious doctrines that gained currency during this period, particularly in Catholicism, led important sectors of the church into prominent positions of human rights advocacy and support for democracy, filling a space in public life when ordinary politics were repressed. International religious influence (particularly from the United States) was important to the positions taken by Latin American Catholic and Protestant churches during this period, which also witnessed an unprecedented growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism.

In the last two decades religion has remained a dynamic force in Latin American societies, now governed by electoral democracies rather than military dictatorships. The unprecedented growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches has attracted scholarship largely focused on support from U.S.-based churches and U.S. “neoliberal” influence more generally. New Protestant doctrinal currents, such as the emphasis on individual salvation, in contrast to the community focus of grassroots Catholicism years ago, are frequently depicted as motivating a withdrawal from public affairs and human rights advocacy. Research interest in Catholicism has declined as the Church has given greater emphasis to personal piety and issues of family morality. In broad terms, scholarship has implicitly treated the two periods differently and neglected historical continuities. Earlier questions about the roles of religious institutions in the defense of victims during the period of dictatorships have not carried over into enquiry about how they have responded to the different forms of violence plaguing Latin America’s electoral democracies today.

This project aims to build upon existing research and stimulate fresh inquiry into how the Christian churches address problems of violence and minister to its victims; and to relate their responses to historical context and different theological and doctrinal traditions in Protestantism and Catholicism. Scholars will undertake thematic and case study research, with particular

attention to the perspectives of religious practitioners, with additional research by journalists on characteristic forms of violence in contemporary Latin America. Findings will circulate both as scholarly publications and as professionally written white papers designed to inform the ongoing efforts of religious leaders, civil society actors, and policy makers who seek effective strategies to diminish violence in contemporary Latin America and empower its victims.

*A. The Problem and Scholarship:*

*Latin American Churches and Violence in Dictatorship and Democracy*

In the last three decades, Latin America has undergone a major historical shift from military dictatorship to electoral democracy. Democratic regimes hold sway across the region and have demonstrated staying power. There are many reasons for this shift – not least the end of the global Cold War – but the role of churches and of religion more broadly is one of the most important and least understood. Churches and religion had a major impact on the defense of human rights that proved central to the ways Latin American societies confronted repressive regimes, political violence and internal wars. Religion was central both to the formulation of a discourse around the idea of human rights and in social mobilization aimed at ensuring respect for human rights and an end to state-sponsored violence. Through their intellectual and spiritual presence, religious institutions challenged the legitimacy of military rule and helped to galvanize support for its democratic alternative. Religious actors and values were also crucial in shaping the wide variety of practices associated with “transitional justice” – truth commissions, trials of those responsible for past violence, and reparations meant to remedy the injustices suffered by victims and incorporate dark periods into “historical memory.”

The role of religious actors and ideas under authoritarian rule and in fostering political transitions to electoral democracy is ripe for re-evaluation. It is a worthy topic in itself but also promises to help us understand better how these roles have evolved historically and played out in the new context of democratic rule. Existing scholarship describes the highlights of the Catholic Church’s actions in the earlier period, but it is now time for a more searching examination of changes in the religious realm as such. The embrace of “human rights” is a central case in point. A concept with strong secular antecedents, notably absent from earlier religious discourse, “human rights” gave a particular content to religious currents associated with Liberation Theology. Ideas such as “structural violence,” “social sin,” and the action of God in history influenced Christians and Church leaders to the active defense of the victims of state violence.

In-depth studies can illuminate how and why this happened in specific cases. They also promise fresh insights into how religious values and practices infused “human rights” and have been carried over – or altered and shifted – since regime transitions to Latin America’s contemporary democracies.

A broadly accepted view of the changes in Catholicism since these transitions runs as follows. After a period of reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has returned to more traditional concerns. Over nearly two generations successive Popes have reasserted control of national ecclesial structures through appointments of bishops and theologians of proven orthodoxy and loyalty to the Vatican. They have curbed currents associated with the Theology of Liberation, perceived as “politicizing” the Church’s role in society, in national hierarchies and Catholic universities. The result has been an institution and faith more concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy and private piety. At the same time, the burgeoning of Protestant and Evangelical churches throughout the region has been seen as a threat to Catholicism’s historic religious dominance. Together these ecclesiastical and social tendencies have led the Catholic Church to pull back from broad public engagement during the contemporary period of electoral democracy. Its previous leadership of ecumenical, politically pluralistic forces on issues of human rights and social justice has given way to retrenchment toward institutional concerns, family morality and personal spirituality.

This account accurately captures major contours of change within Catholicism, but it is insufficiently situated within the historical context of the large processes of democratization and free market development of the contemporary period. In particular, it over-simplifies the degree to which the Church has been unaffected by these changes in context and under-estimates the degree to which the religious changes of the previous period have lived on in new circumstances. Most recent scholarship on Catholicism has addressed different questions – describing differences in measures of social religiosity or between national Hierarchies, for example – without in depth comparative study of survivals of progressive ideas and practices, particularly at local levels. Contemporary democracies also lack the persuasive Grand Narratives of the earlier period of dictatorship and transition, in which “The Church” opposed repressive states and played a vital public role in supporting democratic transitions and ending long-standing insurgencies.

Interpreting the rise and character of Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America has faced a comparable challenge. More particular and local in nature, it has attracted considerable

scholarship, for the most part ethnographic. Its strengths lie in careful description of specific realities and religious practices. This body of research offers scattered evidence about Evangelical responses to violence. Considered together, it offers clues for fresh case studies and comparative research that can illuminate the broader significance of Evangelical Protestantism for contemporary Latin American democracy. Although often depicted as apolitical and concerned solely with personal and communal religiosity, it has in fact exhibited increasing involvement in politics and the public sphere. Does this reflect the membership of Evangelical churches, largely rooted in poor communities that suffer disproportionately from criminal and police violence? How in fact do these churches perceive and respond to victims of violence in their communities? Have their perceptions and responses changed with the different contexts of dictatorship and democracy?

Latin America's democracies suffer from many well-known weaknesses: in their fundamental institutions, in the processes that link their citizens to the making of public policies and in their abilities to improve the lives of the majority of their people. But for their own citizens as well as outside observers, *perhaps their most egregious failure of governance is pervasive crime and related violence*. The issue of "security" – of *delincuencia* and *inseguridad* – consistently tops public opinion polls and policy agendas across the region. Central America's homicide rates are the highest in the world, and Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela lag not far behind. The tentacles of drug trafficking continue to spread. Kidnapping for ransom has become an established industry in many places. This violence has reached the southern border of the United States, entangling already thorny issues of immigration. Thousands of would-be migrants have been victims, caught in a deadly crossfire between the drug gangs and the Mexican armed forces and police. Recent estimates suggest that in 2010 no fewer than 20,000 undocumented migrants were kidnapped while attempting to cross through Mexico to the United States. Violence is also common in rural areas over issues of land and extractive industries, a dynamic fed by the region's current boom of commodity, energy and mineral exports.

The issues of violence and security in Latin America are not the same today as yesterday; nor are they the same under democracy as they were under dictatorship. It is true, unfortunately, that democratization of basic institutions has been partial. Police and military violence in poor communities today can resemble that under dictatorships. Judicial systems and courts have only been partially reformed. Prisons are crowded, violent schools of crime. However, contemporary democracies are distinguished from their authoritarian predecessors by the increase of *non-state*

violence. Such violence existed in the past, to be sure, perpetrated by guerrillas, criminals and paramilitary forces (such as “death squads”). But with the end of internal insurgencies (except in Colombia), and the rise of violent transnational criminal networks, political violence (including that exercised by state agents) is less prominent than what can be labeled broadly “social” violence.<sup>\*</sup> This trend has also been reinforced by the region’s surging economic development, propelled by the expansion of commodity exports, which has thrown up new sources of violent conflict around land and mineral resources. Thus, Latin America’s democracies today face different security challenges than the dictatorships and a significantly different context of a public opinion and civil society – forces to which they must respond but which also offer new potential for effective collaboration.

Religion – including Evangelical Protestantism as well as Catholicism – remains a very relevant force within that context. This project aims to address both the legacy of religious concepts and practices of the recent authoritarian past and new responses that draw from fundamental Christian beliefs and religious communities in contemporary societies. Concepts of “violence” and “victim” as understood during the authoritarian past, for example, assume different meanings in democratized settings in which many long-entrenched structures of oppression have remained and new ones arisen. In today’s electoral democracies and globalized economies, old forms of violence may coexist (as noted) with other agents of violence created by growth. Together these forces have interacted with largely unreformed institutions and persistent structures of inequality, marginalization and exclusion. The state violence of the past – which led churches and religious activists to defend victims in the name of “human rights” – has diminished many places, but in its wake non-state actors have caused suffering on an alarming scale. How much do religious responses today draw from the legacy of the past, and how much do they reflect new religious perceptions and forms of action?

Christianity’s identification with those who suffer is present in both Catholic and Evangelical communities of the region, but how (and even, whether) new forms of violence are mobilizing meaningful moral resistance and political participation motivated by religion is a question that cries out for fresh perspectives and new research. The challenge for scholars in this project is to bring their expertise about religious beliefs, doctrines and practices to case studies of

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<sup>\*</sup> Although the broad distinction is relatively clear, the case of Colombia illustrates the complexity of applying it in practice. It is widely recognized that it suffers from multiple inter-twined *violencias*. Even the assertion that the FARC and other guerrilla forces represent ongoing “political” violence is clouded by their involvement with illegal drug trafficking to support their ostensible revolutionary political goals.

contemporary violence and government policy responses to it. Consider the example of “citizen security” and youth gangs. How do religious responses relate to specific reform efforts at the community level analyzed by academic researchers, journalists and human rights advocates? Conversely, how much do Christians reinforce harsh governmental *mano dura* policies? Similar questions can also be addressed to the current conflicts over land, extractive industries, community rights and population displacement occurring in many Latin American countries today.

### B. *Project Research*

To address religious responses to violence in the past and present, this project will bring together scholars and practitioners engaged with these issues in seven societies: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and Peru. Electoral democracies function today in all of these countries, but they exhibit a useful range of different forms of past and present violence and of responses from Christian churches. In all seven cases religious concepts and practice have evolved in response to national and international change.

- Brazil experienced repressive violence from a military dictatorship that called forth a strong religious defense of human rights and democracy from Christian churches (with notable international networks). It has achieved democratic stability with dynamic economic growth, a substantial civil society, and significant policy initiatives that address violence, including local level police reform. In religious terms, Brazil exhibits significant continuities of progressive Catholic currents, accompanied by rapid growth and public visibility of Evangelical churches, within increasingly progressive post-transition democratic politics. Both political and religious developments under authoritarian and democratic regimes have been examined in a wide scholarly literature.
- Chile lived through a repressive 17-year dictatorship that was opposed by a strong ecumenical movement for human rights and democracy, strongly influenced by the Catholic Church (also with notable international networks and visibility). Although the Church Hierarchy embraced orthodox doctrinal currents and family issues after the restoration of electoral democracy, progressive Catholic activists remained a significant (though low profile) influence on “transitional justice” – a long process that has encompassed the three dimensions of “truth,” “justice” and “reparation” (including concrete remedies for victims and symbolic measures for human rights victims such as memorialization). Political developments during the dictatorship and democracy have

strong scholarly literatures (as does religion in the former period). Since political transition religious developments relevant to this project (such as church initiatives addressing common *delincuencia*, a perennial public concern; or recurrent land-based conflict among the indigenous Mapuches) have been less studied.

- Peru experienced major violence in the context of an internal insurgency (accompanied by significant repression by elected governments), which produced a strong religiously influenced movement for human rights. With the end of the insurgency, the Catholic Hierarchy took a decided turn toward more conservative doctrinal positions, despite relatively weak democratic consolidation. Progressive Catholic and Evangelical currents, however, appear to be addressing issues of both past and contemporary violence, reflected in an emerging scholarship.
- El Salvador similarly experienced a violent internal war that elicited strong Catholic opposition in the defense of human rights (with notably significant international religious linkages). The Church played an important role in a transition that ended the war but has proved to be an incomplete democratic transition. In its public positions, the Hierarchy remains among the most progressive in all Latin America (whose faithful, however, are among the most culturally conservative). The country has also witnessed a major growth of Evangelical Christianity. Violence from common crime and youth gangs are a defining contemporary issue, with *mano dura* public policies alongside various efforts at institutional reform.
- Guatemala also lived through an internal war, met with extreme violence with religious overtones from repressive military governments. The Catholic Church emerged as a firm defender of human rights and supporter of “transitional” reckoning with past violence. Evangelical Christianity experienced vertiginous growth during the internal war and has become a major public presence since the end of internal hostilities. As with El Salvador, Guatemala suffers from extremely high levels of “social” violence from *mara* gangs and drug traffickers. It has drawn substantial scholarship on religion, particularly Evangelical Christianity.
- Colombia remained under elected government throughout this whole period but continues to experience high levels of political and criminal violence despite the durability of electoral democracy. The Catholic Church – particularly the Jesuits – has engaged issues of both state and non-state violence in different ways. This has included the defense of human rights, efforts for peace and a range of humanitarian initiatives toward, for



example, the country's massive population of displaced people. Research on these issues in recent decades is primarily by human rights advocates and religiously linked centers.

- Mexico emerged at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century from a relatively benign authoritarianism and now suffers an especially virulent wave of violence stemming from organized crime, which has been met by harsh governmental policies. Research reveals some progressive religious responses toward problems of violence under authoritarian rule, but more recent studies reflect humanitarian and implicitly democratizing initiatives toward contemporary victims of violence, such as migrants.

This project aims to catalyze dialogue among researchers who have predominantly addressed either the period of dictatorships or that of contemporary democracies, some of whom examine continuities (“legacies,” as John Burdick has usefully called them) and ruptures across this divide. It also seeks to generate exchanges of ideas among specialists approaching religion and the churches from different disciplinary perspectives, to bring their range of insights to common questions around the varying character of “violence” (and its “victims”) in the two periods. And beyond scholarly research, it proposes structured dialogue around these questions with religious “practitioners” and with policy makers, to test how new knowledge may stimulate and enrich the understanding of those who relate to the subject in different but consequential ways.

1. *The Past.* A central objective of research undertaken in this project is to document and analyze how and to what effects religious institutions dealt with human rights abuses during dictatorships and internal wars, i.e. the ways and conditions under which they advocated (however unevenly) for victims of violence perpetrated by states. In the process, we aim to identify the strategies that had greater or lesser impact both for politics and for victims. There is considerable literature that provides a point of departure for our inquiries and which is now ripe for reconsideration. The important syntheses of scholars such as Daniel Levine can be complemented with nuanced, textured case studies of individual countries and churches could reveal the potential contributions of religious institutions to processes of political democratization and empowerment/ratification of victims’ narratives and experiences.

There are significant lessons to be drawn from this for strategic efforts by churches to enhance their impact on rights violations and on victims’ well being, and these are not limited to churches located in the region. Indeed, as we document how churches intervened on behalf of victims in Latin America, we can also inquire as to the parallel efforts of religious actors in the

United States or Europe, following a variety of different strategies, to advocate on behalf of their counterparts elsewhere in the hemisphere. This portion of our inquiry will benefit from the knowledge and insights of thoughtful practitioners who participated in such solidarity efforts. Our aim will be to map the ways in which churches, of various denominations, in the region and beyond, both influenced political outcomes in Latin America and the visibility of victims' claims. We seek fresh understanding of the role of the churches in articulating societal demands for justice and their effectiveness in advancing human rights agendas as a foundation for consideration of how these processes unfold in the present circumstances.

2. *The Present.* With this as point of departure, the second component of research will address the degree to which Latin American populations that once suffered from widespread state-sponsored abuses to human rights are victimized today by violence that is more diverse in origin but no less corrosive to the cause of human rights. Although state agents and actors linked to them often remain a factor in violence, victims today are particularly afflicted by the actions of non-state forces. Violence comes more from society than from the state and frequently has no direct connection to political conflict as such. The question becomes whether what Levine felicitously termed the “repertoire of responses” that religious institutions forged in the context of state-based abuses remains viable under conditions that prevail today. Or whether in contemporary democracies they have found new forms of response to today's violence. Are churches adapting former strategies or ministries for victims of violence or creating new ones?

Comparison of past and present should facilitate understanding of continuities and ruptures in the relationship of religious institutions to violence. These comparisons should encompass not only concrete interventions of church leaders and their flocks but also the doctrinal and conceptual evolutions that guide how they respond. Here, it will be useful to determine whether and under what conditions different churches (Catholic, Evangelical, and variations within each category) approach this question differently. In terms of Catholicism, for example: If the “preferential option for the poor” that emerged from Vatican II and the Latin American Bishops' meeting at Medellín associated violence with exclusion, and the defense of victims of authoritarian regimes associated violence with state terror, how does the Church grapple with and respond to violence perpetrated by non-state and “non-political” actors in the context of democracy today? What are the conceptual frames and social practices used by church leaders to frame action? How have these evolved in response both to new circumstances and to changes in how members of the Hierarchy and leaders of particular communities conceive of the

role of the Church in society and political affairs? In terms of mainline and Evangelical Protestantism, how much do their responses during a time of political violence carry over into the contemporary period? How much do contemporary responses reflect evolving understandings of the character and consequences of social or non-political violence? Are there discernible processes of adaptation or “learning” on the basis of religious doctrines and the churches’ experience in this new context?

3. *Christian theologies and contemporary violence.* A third major question for the project focuses on what might be broadly called different “theologies” within the Christian tradition. Because this project seeks to understand better the religious reasons for responses to violence, religious practitioners are integral participants in our research. Their perspectives are vital to understand the present as well as the past: the doctrines, beliefs, practices, and experiences that have moved them to live their faith as moral witness or humanitarian social action.

Addressing how different theologies engage these matters will involve both reviews of secondary literature and semi-structured interviews with religious officials and believers. It might start with attitudes toward “human rights.” Do religious institutions and believers interpret their relationship to current victims of violence in those terms? Or do they regard “human rights” as a cause of the past, perhaps appropriate in a very different context? Or do they consider “human rights” a political cause, not a religious one? Have they adopted different narratives for today’s victims of violence from those that characterized the violent past? Does this vary by denomination, and if so, why and in what ways? What are the doctrinal rationales that churches draw upon in order to explain what they choose to do, and have these shifted along with the currents of political change?

To gain purchase on these issues will require several complementary methods, involving different groups of analysts.

a. The project will draw on contemporary scholarship, particularly that undertaken by social scientists specializing in religion who have been carrying out field research in Latin America (for example, on intersections between religious conversion and church strategies for diminishing gang membership and violence). It will encourage our scholarly colleagues to step back from the analytical frames for recent research (particularly on Evangelicals in Brazil and Central America) to explore the degrees to which literatures on religion and human rights from

an earlier period may help to account for variations in the present and between our times and those of two to three decades ago.

b. The project will also utilize the skills of investigative journalists who are doing the most impressive work on organized crime and on youth gangs for studies of how religious institutions respond to these phenomena in carefully selected communities. Here we benefit especially from the presence at American University of a team of journalists who have established InSight (<http://www.insightcrime.org>), a web-based clearinghouse of information on organized crime in Latin America, and who also carry out fieldwork in the places afflicted by the spread of the phenomenon in settings such as Mexico, Colombia and Central America.

c. Finally, the project will draw on church leaders and religious intellectuals who are engaged in active programs of intervention to address the needs of victims and protect communities from violence in several different contexts. Our current knowledge points toward four sites of religious engagement with violence and victims:

- Catholic priests and lay activists in Southern Mexico who, in collaboration with sympathizers abroad – and in a manner reminiscent of the sanctuary movement of a quarter century ago – seek to protect Central American migrants from the violence inflicted upon them by criminal networks and by agents of the Mexican state.
- Both Catholic and Evangelical churches in urban Brazil are doing well-known work on violence prevention. Scholars would clearly benefit from understanding better the relationship between what they are doing today and action under dictatorship, and how the diversity of approaches is related to different “theologies.”
- Religious networks in Colombia, particularly those of the Jesuits, who have a long history of initiatives addressing violence and its victims, in a context in which continuities between the past and present appear particularly significant.
- Christian responses to violence in Central America, where the scale and devastation of violence stands out as particularly severe in both past and present, and where Catholic and Evangelical responses appear to have been most divergent.

Despite important changes that accompanied the transition from state-organized violence to violence that emanates largely from polarized and crime-ridden societies, churches undoubtedly remain important for shaping societal responses to violence and to ministering to its victims. No less certain is that churches will have to form part of the complex institutional networks whose strengths must be drawn upon in order to diminish the prevalence of violence and reduce the suffering it causes. Thus, this research matters for churches, for citizens, and for

both government and NGO actors that seek to intervene to strengthen institutions that can play a role in mitigating violence and its consequences.

### *C. Project elements and calendar*

The project will be directed by Alexander Wilde, a political scientist with broad expertise on questions relating to democratic transitions, religion and Latin American politics, and human rights. Eric Hershberg, director of the AU Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS), will provide ongoing input. Also a political scientist, he has worked on a variety of issues relating to human rights and democracy in the region and collaborated with Wilde on a successful international cross-disciplinary project on “historical memory” in South America. Joseph Eldridge – a Latin Americanist and Methodist minister – is American University’s Chaplain and a renowned advocate for human rights. He will help guide project development throughout, with a leading role in dialogues with religious activists in both the U.S. and Latin America.

Scholarly specialists on religion and religious practitioners are the key participants throughout the project. Investigative journalists, policy makers and policy advocates whose work is relevant to project concerns will also be incorporated specific ways, described below and indicated on the project calendar.

In 2012, the project will identify and recruit scholars who already have substantial experience studying religious institutions and practices that we believe will welcome the opportunity to take part in this endeavor focused on the specific problem of violence. We will also identify religious practitioners and institutions whose participation is vital for the project to succeed as envisioned and identify policy makers and programs that address issues of violence in Latin America.

Over the course of this initial year, we will engage religious activists in the field who can reflect on several issues that are central to our inquiry: (1) How they dealt with human rights abuses under dictatorships, their reasons for responding as they did, to what effect, and how (if at all) this experience informs what they do today faced with equally devastating violence under democracies; (2) how churches have dealt specifically with defense and reparation of victims (for example, to assist people to overcome long lingering trauma, or through “symbolic” reparations to recover their human dignity); (3) as for U.S. based religious advocates (and for both domestic and external policy-makers as well), the persistent questions are how solidarity is

practiced under dictatorship and democracy and the ramifications of the differences for practical action. How best to structure interactions with practitioners over the course of the project is an issue we will explore in our March planning meeting. At this juncture, we are debating formats for iterative conversations with religious activists concerning what we find over the course of the research and how this matters for how they approach these issues.

We believe that the historical re-examination of the ways that religious organizations, in Latin America and U.S.-based, responded to political violence and human rights violations by dictatorships can reveal fresh insights into U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s and '80s, when human rights emerged as a key issue in U.S.-Latin American relations. Better understanding of how religious groups and institutions shaped U.S. policy during that period can facilitate analysis of its ramifications for policy today. Research on how Christian groups engage with current questions of violence, insecurity, and human rights abuse, both by states and non-state actors, is also relevant to proclaimed U.S. foreign policy goals in the last decade on those issues. In terms of the financial and human resources currently dedicated to Latin America, most U.S. assistance has been channeled into security-related projects, including Plan Colombia, Plan Mérida, and the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Although heavily weighted to military and police strategies, the latter two initiatives in particular have included significant support for civil society organizations, including faith-based groups, in efforts designed to reduce violence and rehabilitate perpetrators of crime.

Dialogues with policy makers involved with such efforts can facilitate exchange on different experiences and perspectives. This is clearly a fraught area politically, but even NGOs critical of the militarization of U.S. policy have recognized the potential usefulness of collaboration on approaches that engage civil society actors in contemporary Latin America, including faith-based groups. Particularly where state presence is weak and security concerns are often gravest, civil society actors have served as important liaisons between communities and U.S. government agencies. An enhanced understanding of how churches have done this effectively, both in the past and in the present, could present a better alternative to further militarization of policy.

The project aims at impact in multiple domains:

- A substantial volume consisting of carefully revised and integrated contributions from scholars who participate in the research over the course of the two years of work. This

book, to be edited by Wilde and including contributions from leading scholars working in the field, will be directed primarily to the fields of contemporary Latin American history, democratization and religion and politics.

- Collaboration with journalists and religious practitioners, who will work alongside participating scholars throughout the project, will produce non-academic texts on these issues, to be published in magazines, websites and/or church publications.
- A commissioned series of professionally produced white papers will aim to distill key research findings – with due attention to nuance and complexity – to policy communities and human rights advocates in ways that are relevant to their strategies and practices.
- The Center’s website ([www.american.edu/clals](http://www.american.edu/clals)), its Facebook page and Twitter feeds will disseminate key ideas iteratively, as they arise from our work, over the course of the project on the Center’s website. They would invite critical comment and, more generally, aim to generate greater interest in the role of religion in advocating for victims of violence and protecting their human rights.
- Structured dialogues would be held with policy-makers in Washington whose programs have an impact on issues of violence in Latin America, including those in international and U.S. government agencies and non-governmental organizations of policy advocates, who possess fine-grained grounded knowledge relevant to our concerns and who meet regularly with policy makers to exchange views on current issues. The goal of these dialogues would be to discuss insights into how collaboration with faith-based institutions can facilitate achievement of core policy objectives with regard to violence prevention and human rights protection.