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Review

Agitators, Tranquilizers, or Something Else: Do Religious Groups Increase or Decrease Contentious Collective Action?

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Abstract: This article critically assesses existing scholarship on the roles that religious groups play in collective contention. Researchers disagree on three main issues: (a) whether religious doctrines and values make religious groups more or less likely to launch collective contention; (b) whether religious groups reflect and reinforce politically relevant schisms and bring about regime change; and (c) whether the organizational structure of religious groups facilitates or prevents contentious collective action. This article urges researchers in the field (a) to extend their empirical enquiries into polytheistic, pantheistic, and non-theistic religions; (b) to conduct more cross-national and comparative studies; and (c) to think beyond the traditional framework of church–state relations. Calling for challenges to a one-dimensional understanding on the relationship between religious groups and collective contention, this article suggests that a better understanding of this relationship can be achieved by (a) explicitly defining the boundary conditions within which a theory works and (b) embracing a relational perspective that focuses not on religious groups per se but on their interactions with other social and political players.

Keywords: religious groups; contentious politics; social stability; collective contention; value; doctrine; social cleavages; church–state relations; social capital; associational life

1. Introduction

Religious groups are among the most influential and powerful social forces in human societies. Wherever they exist, these groups not only shape people's daily lives but are also frequently involved in many fields that are often considered 'secular,' including but not limited to elections (Broughton and Napel 2000), environmental movements (Berry 2015), political campaigns (Limaye et al. 2004), public goods provision (Tsai 2007), and national identity building (Van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). For social scientists who are interested in the factors that affect the stability and dynamics of ruling orders, the roles played by religious groups in contentious politics are particularly fascinating.

Indeed, considerable academic attention has been paid to the topic since the early days of modern social sciences. However, despite the rich literature in this field, no clear consensus has been reached as to whether religious groups increase or decrease political contention. In fact, the relationship between religious groups and contentious politics is at the center of an ongoing theoretical debate in which two major schools of thoughts have emerged. While a considerable number of theorists suggest that religious groups help maintain social stability, acting as social tranquillizers that reduce the likelihood of collective contention, others argue that religious groups frequently challenge the existing social order, serving as social agitators that encourage or mobilize collective contention. This article aims to review the major arguments in this debate, and to map out new frontiers for future studies in the field.

As further demonstrated later in this article, social scientists are split over the roles of religious groups in contentious politics because they have fundamentally different views on three important

issues, namely: (a) whether religious doctrines and values make religious groups more or less likely to launch collective contention; (b) whether religious groups reflect and reinforce politically-relevant schisms and bring about regime change; and (c) whether the organizational structure of religious groups facilitates or prevents contentious collective action. The first three sections of this article review the theoretical debates around each of these issues. The last section points out remaining gaps in our knowledge, reviews recent studies that intend to narrow such gaps, and suggests some possible directions for further studies in the field.

2. Doctrines, Values, and the Roles of Religious Groups in Contentious Politics

Doctrines and values are core elements of religious beliefs and practices. Many theorists suggest that religious doctrines and values can reduce believers' consciousness of social conflicts and class contradictions, and thus help maintain the legitimacy of the existing political order. Therefore, members of religious groups have less incentive to launch or join contentious collective action than others, and religious groups should therefore be considered as social tranquillizers.

Karl Marx (1977, p. 131) famously claimed in 1843 that religion serves as the 'opium of the people'. Although there are disagreements as to what Marx intended by drawing the comparison, it is generally argued that the famous theorist felt that religion reduces popular awareness of class conflict and suppresses people's willingness to engage in class struggle by providing them with a 'fantastic realization of the human essence' that 'has not acquired any true reality'. This view has been widely echoed. For example, just four years later, Charles Kingsley, who was a canon of the Church of England, argued that one function of the Bible was to 'keep beasts of burden patient while they are being overloaded' (Selsam and Martel 1987, p. 224). Similarly, in his discussions on the theodicy of good fortune and misfortune, Max Weber indicates that religion and religious groups can 'mollify those at the bottom of the social structure' and thus 'sanctify the status quo' (Pyle and Davidson 1998, p. 499). In addition, Stark (1972) argues that the poor are more likely to be attracted by aspects of faith that serve as relief for suffering; and Pope (1942) and Howe (1981) emphasize that the wealthy and powerful are able to control and manipulate belief systems, often appropriating religious ideas to legitimate existing social structures.

According to the aforementioned scholars, religions and religious groups not only blur the lines between different social classes, communities, and groups but also reduce social and political conflicts and people's awareness of them. Such a view, however, has been challenged by researchers in a wide range of fields, from religious studies to social psychology. Study of the link between religious groups and collective violence has become a veritable industry since the 9/11 (Basedau et al. 2016). While traditional studies on religions tend to emphasize that strong belief could bring peace and harmony into people's lives, more and more recent academic attention is given to the other side of religious doctrines and values. Instead of considering religious groups as social tranquillizers, many contemporary researchers believe that religious doctrines and values can make religious groups into social agitators that bring about more collective contention.

Woodberry and Shah (2004), for instance, suggest that participatory and civic attitudes are embedded in Protestant doctrine so that Protestants are more likely to engage in collective action, which can easily turn contentious when Protestantism is not the majority religion in the society. Lam (2006) likewise argues that Protestantism offers a 'double advantage' for societal mobilization: its churches provide social networks that enable collective action on the one hand, and its doctrines encourage individuals to proactively participate in these collective actions on the other. Therefore, compared with individuals or other sorts of associations, religious groups such as Protestant churches are more capable of launching collective contention when they are willing to do so. Morris (1986) provides empirical evidence for this, suggesting that the civil rights movement in the United States would not have been possible without clergy involvement. In addition to contention driven by Protestant churches, 'Liberation Theology' has emerged among Catholic churches in Latin America, and is also considered an important factor in driving collective resistance against authoritarian regimes there (e.g.,

Adriance 1986; Neal 1987). That is to say, religious doctrines do not always perpetuate the status quo; instead, as Pyle and Davidson (1998) put it, they 'also can serve a prophetic function, promoting social action to redress society's ills'.

Christianity, of course, is not the only religion whose doctrines and values are used as a trigger of collective contention and sometimes violence. According to psychologists such as Strozier and Terman (2010, p. 3), 'the malevolent influence of fundamentalism' can be observed in 'all world religions', because 'religion attracts humans with an inclination for pondering ultimate questions; some are extremists'. Scheuer (2011) detailed study of the life of Osama bin Laden, for example, reveals that the founding leader of al-Qaeda was first and foremost a pious Muslim—from the 1980s to his death in 2011, Islam was always the main motive behind his political and military actions against the Soviet Union, the United States, and even his home country of Saudi Arabia.

Religious doctrines and values may also provide ideological frameworks and discourses that facilitate and justify collective contention, and religions can further stimulate competition between group identities, which often 'plays a central role in the inception and escalation of intergroup conflict', by supplying 'cosmologies, moral frameworks, . . . traditions, and other identity supporting content that answers to individuals' needs for psychological stability' (Seul 1999, p. 553). As summarized clearly by Basedau et al. (2016, p. 230),

> *'Religious ideas are shared values and norms that commonly include appeals for appropriate behavior on the part of believers. These ideas are legitimized by a (presumably) transcendental source, and therefore, they are barely subject to negotiation and compromise given their accepted supernatural origin. As a result, religious ideas can increase the likelihood of armed conflict onset if conflict-oriented ideas become the guiding principles of one religious community.'*

Supportive evidence of this argument has been provided by studies on Islam (Khosrokhavar 2010; Hegghammer 2010), Hinduism (McLane 2010), and American apocalyptic Christianity (Jones 2010), suggesting that religious groups are likely to increase the likelihood of collective protest.

3. 'The Third Wave of Democratization', Politically Relevant Schisms, and the Roles of Religious Groups in Contentious Politics

From the mid-1970s to the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, many authoritarian regimes in Asia, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Eastern Europe collapsed and were replaced by democratic governments. During this process, which Huntington (1991) and many others describe as 'the third wave of democratization', religion and religious groups are believed to have played an important role in launching collective contention and overthrowing the existing ruling order.

According to Huntington and followers such as Anderson (2006), there is a close link between Christianity and democratic movements. In fact, Huntington (1996, pp. 192–93) states clearly that 'by the 1990s, except from Cuba, democratic transitions had occurred in most of the countries, outside Africa, whose peoples espoused Western Christianity or where major Christian influences existed'. Rich supporting evidence for Huntington's argument came from former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. It has been well accepted that the Catholic Church in Poland played a very important role in cooperating with the *Solidarity* in contentious collective action against the Communist government in Warsaw. The Catholic Church not only provided safe places for strike leaders to meet and discuss their plans once solidarity had been pronounced illegal in 1982, but also delivered foreign financial aid directly (Schweizer 1994). The Catholic Church and the future Polish pope, John Paul II, also frequently endorsed solidarity through the domestic and international media (Millard 1999, pp. 47–48). Moreover, many Catholic Church members took a direct part in collective contention launched by solidarity (Ramet 2017), and the murder of Father Jerzy Popieluszko soon became the fuse of a large-scale anti-government demonstration (Weigel 1992, pp. 149–54). Similar phenomena could also be observed in the former German Democratic Republic, where the East German Protestant Church cooperated closely with many other civil rights organizations in the independent peace movements against Socialist militarism (Tismaneanu 1990, pp. 144–46).

The primary axis of conflict in the post-Cold War world, according to Huntington (1996), falls not along ideological or economic lines, but cultural and religious ones. This thesis is supported by empirical evidence drawn from across the globe, including Southeast Asia (Searle 2002; Houben 2003), South Asia (Cady and Simon 2006; Gould 2011), the Middle East (Baumgartner et al. 2008), Africa (Ukiwo 2003; Ellis and Haar 2004), and the Balkan Peninsula (Bax 2000).

It should be noted that conflicts associated with the clash of religions not only exists on the macro level; as Huntington (1996, p. 207) points out, such conflict manifests itself in both fault line (local-level) and core state conflicts. Religious communities by nature normally privilege in-group believers over out-group non-believers. As a result, the clash of religions can significantly increase the risk of collective contention if the boundaries of religious communities overlap with other politically relevant cleavages—especially ethnicity, either in a given country (Selway 2011) or in regions with multiple countries (Horowitz 2000). Notorious armed conflicts, for example, occur when religious and ethnic boundaries run parallel to each other in Sudan, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Balkans (Basedau et al. 2011, 2016).

Religious groups are not gatherings of people with similar beliefs and values but also powerful human institutions that carry certain cultural, economic, and political interests. In a world that is undergoing increased globalization, clashes and competitions between religious groups are inevitable, and so are the underlying conflicts of the cultural, economic, and political interests embedded in religious groups. As Ignatieff (1993) argues, religious cleavages often follow sociopolitical cleavages so that the elements of religious conflicts are usually difficult to distinguish from other divisions. According to Furseth and Repstad (2006, p. 163), conflicts among religious groups may not only reflect more profound sociopolitical conflicts, but also aggravate them. Likewise, Brekke (2009) finds that religious groups may trigger sociopolitical conflicts and even legitimate the use of violence.

If Huntington and his followers are correct, religious groups should be positively correlated with the occurrence of collective contention, especially in countries that are yet to experience democratization. However, the idea that religious groups are the main triggers of collective contention and even violence during and after the third wave of democratization is a much-debated thesis, and faces many serious challenges.

Firstly, democratization also occurred in regions that are traditionally outside of Christendom. Ying-shih Yu, for example, argues that the statement that 'Christian leaders promoted movement toward democracy in South Korea and Taiwan' is 'extremely misleading' as far as Taiwan is concerned; according to Yu (1997, p. 258) 'Taiwan's successful political transformation has many causes, but Christianity has not yet proved to be one of them'. Moreover, many influential religious communities in Taiwan, especially Buddhists, played a minimal role in the island's transitional to democracy, despite 'their achievements in the areas of education, welfare provision, charity, and . . . proselytization' and despite 'the fact that they are far more numerous than their Christian compatriots' (Laliberté 2003, p. 158). In fact, for many religions in Taiwan, active engagements with local politics are more likely a result of rather than the reason for the democratization in Taiwan (Weller 2000; Katz 2003).

Secondly, religious groups may be involved in contentious collective action and even violence, but are not necessarily more mutinous or violent than other social and political organizations. Tilly (2003), for example, finds that religion is just one of the many factors that may lead to collective violence. Toft (2007, p. 97) argues that religion often gets involved in contentious collective action as a result of the rational choice of political elites, who are likely to 'tender religious bids when they calculate that increasing their religious legitimacy will strengthen their chances of [political] survival'. Cavanaugh goes even further, fundamentally rejecting the concept of religious violence by suggesting that this concept is a 'myth' that is constructed by 'Western' societies to legitimate their own violence:

> *'[T]here is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion and that essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of different configurations of power. . . . [The] myth [of religious violence] can be and is used in domestic politics to legitimate the marginalization of certain types of*

> *practices and groups labelled religious, while underwriting the nation-state's monopoly on its citizens' willingness to sacrifice and kill.'* (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 4, 59)

Furthermore, religious traditions contain the seeds of reconciliation as well as of conflicts and violence. For example, according to Wedeen (2003, pp. 54–55), 'Huntington's analysis neglects the terrains of solidarity and fluidity that exist between Muslims and non-Muslims, the ways in which political communities of various sorts have depended on the cross-fertilization of ideas and practices'. Ganiel (2008) and Wells (2010) find that religious groups have made and are still making positive contributions towards peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, a region where religious groups have played a significant role in its violent history. As Casanova insightfully concludes, while religious groups could be seen as 'exclusive, particularist, and primordial' on one hand, they can also be rich with 'inclusive, universalist, and transcending [values]' on the other (Casanova 1994, pp. 3–4). In other words, the critics of Huntingdon believe that religious groups are either negatively correlated with the chance of contentious collective action in a society or have no correlation with contentious collective action at all.

4. Trust, Social Capital, and the Roles of Religious Groups in Contentious Politics

Since the early 1990s, when Putnam et al. (1994) published their famous book *Making Democracy Work*, the link between the vibrancy of associational life and social stability has generated much discussion, acclaim, and criticism in and beyond the field of social sciences. As one of the most powerful and widespread forms of social organization and interpersonal network, religious groups are clearly regarded as human institutions that carry social capital (Smidt 2003). Like many other social organizations, religious groups can effectively integrate people with different backgrounds into a common community, and can efficiently launch and organize collective action thanks to the low information costs that accompany network effects and economies of scale (Katz and Shapiro 1985; Mankiw 2011, p. 272), peer pressure (Ostrom 1990), and the function they play in linking two or more previously unconnected social communities, classes, or sites (Zald and McCarthy 1987; Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam et al. 2001, p. 142; Hensmans 2003).

If the idea that democracy, good governance, and stability require the presence and vitality of social organizations is true, then religious groups should reduce the likelihood of social unrest. Indeed, this argument is endorsed by many scholars who believe that religion and religious groups are important sources of social capital and social trust. For example, Smidt (1999) finds that church attendance and religious traditions play important roles in fostering civil engagement and social capital in Canada and the United States. Veenstra (2002) claims that religious groups are 'one of the most salient predictors of trust' and finds that there is 'an intriguing link between faith and trust'. Wuthnow (2002) suggests that religious groups have significantly positive effects on bridging social capital. Welch et al. (2004) argue that religious groups not only 'promote in-group bonding' but also 'instill a sense of social connection that extends beyond' the boundaries of the groups themselves. Given their social function of creating or maintaining high levels of social capital and trust, some see religious groups as supporting democracy (Putnam et al. 1994, pp. 12–14), expediting social integration (Inglehart 1997, pp. 172–74), reducing social conflicts, and increasing social harmony (Fukuyama 1995).

However, as well as applying embedded trust, solidarity, and social capital to promote and maintain social stability, religious groups can also use their organizational structure to launch and mobilize contentious collective action. Based on a careful study of documentary data that 'contain references to several hundred religious revitalization movements, among both western and non-western peoples, on five continents', Wallace (1956) suggests that religious awakenings are social movements and religious groups play important roles in challenging and changing the existing social and cultural systems. Juergensmeyer (2004, p. 6) reports that the proportion of religious groups in the RAND-St. Andrews Chronology of International Terrorism has kept increasing in recent years. The role that religious groups play in fostering collective contention has also been confirmed by much empirical research. For example, Osa (1996) argues that the Solidarity Movement in Poland could not

have succeeded without drawing upon a social network of elites embedded in the Polish Catholic Church. Salehi (1988) demonstrates that the Iranian Revolution of 1978 to 1979 largely benefited from the pre-existing organizations and leadership created by Muslim groups. Tao (2017) shows that only the Communists and Nationalists penetrated religious groups to advance their own agenda for violent uprisings during China's revolutions in the first half of the twentieth century. More directly, by analyzing the experiences of religious leaders and church members in the liberation struggles in Central America in the 1980s, Nepstad (2004) found that religious groups played the most important role in the process of mobilizing collective contention; this was due to the clergy's ability to use 'religious rituals, martyr stories, and biblical teachings to establish a link between faith and activism' among the church members. Therefore, if the experiences in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Central America can be applied to the rest of the world, we should see religious groups encouraging rather than discouraging collective contention.

5. Limitations of the Existing Debate and Possible Directions for Future Research

The existing debates on the relationship between religious groups and collective contention are summarized in Table 1. As it appears in the table, both sides in the debates offered considerable insights on the possible mechanisms by which religious groups contribute to the aggregation and tranquilization of collective contention. However, whilst the existing discussions in this field have greatly improved our understanding of the roles played by religious groups in contentious politics, they have also left at least five knowledge gaps that we have to bridge before we can build an accurate and comprehensive picture of this enigmatic relationship.

Firstly, a large proportion of relevant studies focus on institutional monotheisms, especially Christian denominations. While institutional monotheisms such as Christianity and Islam are indeed important religious forces, they fall short of monopolizing the global religious markets. Therefore, the debates in this field would benefit greatly from more comparative studies with polytheistic, pantheistic and non-theistic religions, including, but not limited to, Buddhist, Hindu, and Taoist groups, as well as informal gatherings of various popular religions.

Secondly, although researchers have increasingly recognized that religious identities are often intertwined with ethnical, political, and cultural identities in collective contention as well as in people's everyday life (Basedau et al. 2011; Chun 2009; Tambiah 1996; Tao and Stapleton 2018), not enough has been done to explicitly distinguish the effects of religious participation from those of other factors that may influence the likelihood of contentious collective action, such as ethnicity, political ideology, and cultural identity. The vast majority of existing scholarship in this field simply focuses on religious groups per se. As a result, it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to tell whether the correlation between religious participation and the likelihood of collective contention reflects a direct causal relation or the existence of other factors having a causal relation with both. One possible approach to overcome this methodological challenge is to explicitly compare the actions and behaviors of religious believers with their peers who claim no religious affiliation.[1] Likewise, well-designed comparative studies on the actions and behaviors of believers of different religions are also needed for the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religious groups and collective contention.

[1] For a good example outside the field of contentious politics, see Entwistle's (2016) study on religious belief and national narratives amongst young, urban Chinese Protestants.

Table 1. A summary of the competing arguments regarding the relationship between religious groups and collective contention.

Views \ Perspectives	Doctrines & Values	Politically-Relevant Cleavages	Trust & Social Capital
Religious groups as social tranquilizers: reducing the chance of occurring collective contention	• Religious groups can blur the boundaries between different social classes, communities and/or groups. • Religious groups can reduce social and political conflicts or people's awareness of such conflicts. • Religious groups can prompt peace and harmony because these values are embedded in many religious doctrines.	• The link between religious groups and democratization is flawed. • Religious groups are not necessarily more, and often less, mutinous or violent than other social and political organizations. • Religious traditions contain seeds for reconciliation, and sometimes religious groups are pioneers or the main promoters of political reconciliation.	• Religious groups are human institutions that carry social capital, which is closely related to democracy, good governance, and social stability. • Religious groups can effectively integrate people with different backgrounds into a common community and thus avoid social conflicts and collective contention. • Religious groups can create or maintain a high level of trust in the society.
Religious groups as social agitators: increasing the chance of occurring collective contention	• Religious groups can bring about collective contention because some religious doctrines encourage struggles and resistances • The 'malevolent' influence of fundamentalism can be observed in all world religions, because religion attracts humans with an inclination for pondering ultimate questions; some are extremists. • Religious doctrines and values may also provide ideological frameworks and discourses that facilitate and justify collective contention.	• Christian groups launched and supported pre-democracy collective protests in many former authoritarian countries. • Religious groups may intensify politically relevant cleavages, especially when religious clash are reinforced by ethnic differences. • Religious groups may compete and struggle with each other when their underlying cultural, economic, and political interests are in conflict.	• Religious groups can facility or foster collective contention because they enable activists to use religious rituals, martyr stories, and biblical teachings to establish a link between faith and activism. • Religious groups can efficiently launch and organize collective contention thanks to the low information costs accompanied by network effects, the economy of scale, and peer pressure. • Religious groups can enable mobilization across two or more previously unconnected social communities, classes, or sites.

Thirdly, many existing theoretical discussions are presented within the framework of church–state relations, which presumes that churches stand parallel to the state. This, however, is not the case in at least two types of countries: on the one hand, in countries such as China, the state is so powerful that even religious groups that are vigorously active in local or regional communities are not capable of challenging the state on the national level;[2] on the other hand, in countries such as Somalia, militias committed to certain religious doctrines have overwhelmed the state and become the most powerful political players. These two types of countries certainly should not be neglected because they dominate many other important discussions in the field of social and political studies. A better understanding of the relationship between religious groups and collective contention is also likely to be achieved through more cross-national and comparative studies in countries that are otherwise similar but significantly different in terms of their religious traditions and landscapes.

Fourth, not enough attention has been devoted to explicitly placing the relationship between religious groups and collective contention in the context of the longer process of history. Human beings learn from the experience of their ancestors, and they often, though not always, try to avoid the negative consequences caused by the mistakes of their ancestors. For example, as previously reviewed in this article, while religious groups played important roles in the escalation of collective violence in Northern Ireland, more recent scholarship reveals that these groups have also made—and are still making—positive contributions to peace and reconciliation in the area (Ganiel 2008; Wells 2010). On the other hand, Toft (2007, p. 97) reveals that 'the historical absence of an internecine religious civil war similar to the Thirty Years' War in Europe' is one of the main reasons why 'Islam was involved in a disproportionately high number of civil wars compared with other religions' between 1940 and 2000. To better understand how the relationship between religious groups and collective contention evolved in the course of history, we need more ambitious scholarly endeavors that look beyond cross-sectional data or short periods of history.

Finally and more seriously, there are two misleading presumptions underlying many existing theories in the field. On the one hand, very few theorists have explicitly defined the boundary conditions within which their theories work; as a result, these theorists either implicitly claim that all religious groups are social agitators or imply that all religious groups are social tranquillizers. However, the actual role played by religious groups in contentious politics may be diverse rather than unitary. On the other hand, when explaining the relationship between religious groups and collective protests, many existing theories either focus on the religious groups or regard such relationships as a result of the interactions between religious groups and the state. However, other players in the political arena, such as civic groups, ethnic communities, political parties, militias, foreign governments, and international organizations, may all play a part in determining the role of religious groups in contentious politics.

Fortunately, researchers have started tackling the aforementioned issues, and insightful findings are emerging in the field. For example, based on an empirical study of the social and political roles played by Latin American Christian churches, Trejo (2012) argues that the relationship between religious groups and collective protests is not fixed; instead, it depends on the structure of the local religious market: religious groups are more likely to act as social tranquillizers when facing no religious competition, but are more likely to act as social stimulants where intensive religious competition exists. Tsai (2007) finds that temples and churches may differ in political status due to particular geo-historical backgrounds: in China, temples usually develop indigenously, and they thus are usually better tolerated by the state and more closely cooperate with the state, whereas churches are believed to have higher subversive potential because of their historical associations with invaders and rebels. Tao (2012, 2015) finds that collective contention is less likely to occur in villages with religious groups that simultaneously overlap with civic organizations and local authorities and are hence more likely to

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[2] For an explanation of the historical foundation of religious restrictions in contemporary China, see Tao (2017); for an update on the religious situation in China, including the country's new regulations on religious affairs that took effect in February 2018, see Albert (2018).

serve as credible communication channels between local states and discontented citizens. This finding suggests that the relationship between religious groups and collective contention may be diverse, and that such a relationship may be shaped not only by religious groups but also by other important players in the local political arena.

The list of recent examples of excellent and exciting academic works in this field, of course, could go on much longer. However, more attention should perhaps focus on the many theoretical puzzles that remain unsolved. For example, although Tao, Trejo, and Tsai find that the relationship between religious groups and contentious collective action is multidirectional, they suggest different casual mechanisms. Are these mechanisms applicable to other countries and/or regions? If so, which mechanism is most widely applicable? If not, is there any framework that could 'universally' address what actually determines the role a religious group may play in contentious politics? Furthermore, is the relationship between religious groups and collective contention always direct and causal? Is there any case in which such a relationship is an apparent one influenced by antecedent variables? In addition, is the role of religious groups in contentious politics different from that of civic voluntary organizations? Should all non-governmental organizations, religious and secular alike, be considered similar players when we discuss their role in contentious politics? Moreover, when it comes to contentious collective action, it is possible to explicitly distinguish religious groups from other social groups in the first place, given that many voluntary associations and political organizations have either a religious component or a deep root in religious movements? Answering these questions requires both theoretical imagination and empirical analysis. The longstanding debate regarding the relationship between religious groups and collective protests still awaits fresh contributions.

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