



5-2019

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

Yasemin Akbaba  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/poliscifac>

 Part of the [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Akbaba, Yasemin. (2019). "Protest and Religion: An Overview" In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/poliscifac/48>

This open access encyclopedia article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Protest and Religion: An Overview

## **Abstract**

After decades-long neglect, a growing body of scholarship is studying religious components of protests. Religion's role as a facilitator, the religious perspective of protesters, the goals of religious actors as participants, and faith-based outcomes of protests have been examined using quantitative and qualitative methodology. Although it is now a thriving research field, due to recent contributions, incorporating faith-based variables in protest research is a challenging task since religion travels across different levels of analysis; effortlessly merges with thick concepts such as individual and collective identity; and takes different shapes and color when it surfaces in various social contexts across the globe. Therefore, at the religion and protest nexus, there are more questions than answers. Research in the field would improve by investing more on theoretical frameworks and expanding the availability of qualitative and quantitative data.

## **Keywords**

religion, protest, rise of religion, religious actors, Arab uprisings, MENA, politics and religion

## **Disciplines**

International Relations | Political Science | Religion

### Protest and Religion: An Overview

Yasemin Akbaba

Subject: Contentious Politics and Political Violence, Political Behavior, Political Values, Beliefs, and Ideologies, World Politics

Online Publication Date: May 2019 DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.989

### Summary and Keywords

After decades-long neglect, a growing body of scholarship is studying religious components of protests. Religion's role as a facilitator, the religious perspective of protesters, the goals of religious actors as participants, and faith-based outcomes of protests have been examined using quantitative and qualitative methodology. Although it is now a thriving research field, due to recent contributions, incorporating faith-based variables in protest research is a challenging task since religion travels across different levels of analysis; effortlessly merges with thick concepts such as individual and collective identity; and takes different shapes and color when it surfaces in various social contexts across the globe. Therefore, at the religion and protest nexus, there are more questions than answers. Research in the field would improve by investing more on theoretical frameworks and expanding the availability of qualitative and quantitative data.

Keywords: religion, protest, rise of religion, religious actors, Arab uprisings, MENA, politics and religion

---

### Introduction

Researchers have attempted to understand religious components of protests and the ways in which faith-based factors influence mobilization patterns of individuals and groups. This article aims to provide an overview of the scholarship at the nexus between religion and protest. Research reveals the changing nature and presence of religion in contemporary politics. One aspect of this shift is due to the "transformation of old religious institutions" (Juergensmeyer, Griego, & Soboslai, 2015, p. 2). As they explain, the makeover is not a uniform process:

In many cases, traditional religion had become politicized, in some cases fused with right-wing nationalism, as traditional leaders led the charge against pluralism and secularism and, in an era in which the nation-state is under siege, saw an opportunity for nationalism to be buttressed by religious ideologies and institutions.

(Juergensmeyer et al., 2015, p. 2)

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

This global change in religious leaders, institutions, and ideologies creates an opening for faith to show up at protests. However, like the nature of the global “transformation” (Juergensmeyer et al., 2015), religion’s presence and impact on nature of protests are diverse. In order to capture the diverse nature of the field, the debates on religion and protest are explored in three sections. The first provides an overview of re-discovery of religion, with a focus on debates on locating religion in politics. This section connects religion and protest scholarship to other research agendas that include religion. The second specifically reviews the scholarship on religion and protest under two broad categories: religion as a facilitator of protests with a focus on structural and ideological factors; and religious protest participants (actors/individuals involved in protests) as well as their goals, with a focus on questions such as: Who protests? Why? What are the goals of protesters?<sup>1</sup> The third is devoted to case studies, as such studies reveal context-dependent aspects of this scholarship. Finally, there are some concluding remarks.

## The Rediscovery of Religion

It is no secret that religion had been absent in international relations (IR) and comparative politics (CP) scholarship until recently (Fox & Sandler, 2004). Much ink has been applied to explanations of the causes and consequences of this omission, and to ways to fill the gap (Fox, 2001; Juergensmeyer, 2008; Pavlos & Petit, 2003; Smith, 1996; Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011). Assumptions of modernization and secularization theories that suggested a decline in influence of religious traditions (Sahliyah, 1990), the legacy of the Treaty of Westphalia (Fox & Sandler, 2004), and difficulty of quantifying religion-based variables, kept religion in the margins. The 9/11 attacks and the following terror attacks, such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the assassination of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh in 2004, and the London train and bus bombings in 2005, centralized religion’s position in world politics. As “God’s century” (Toft et al., 2011) rolled in, the number of scholarly works on religion increased.

The growing political significance of religious actors (and faith-based issues) initiated a debate on the soundness of theories such as modernization and secularization that had predicted increasing secular inclinations associated with increasing industrialization. Some scholars have noted their concerns regarding assumptions of secularization theory early on. For instance, Stark and Bainbridge (1985, p. 1) wrote: “Fashionable opinion holds the trend toward secularism to be rapid and inevitable. The argument developed in this book is very unfashionable.” Later in the book they explain their rationale:

Our theory of religion forces the conclusion that religion is not in its last days. We think that most modern scholars have misread the future because they have mistakenly identified the dominant religious traditions in modern society with the phenomenon of religion in general. Most observers have noted correctly that major Christian-Judaic organizations are failing, but they have not seen or appreciated the vigor of religion in less “respectable” quarters.

(Stark & Bainbridge, 1985, pp. 430-431)

---

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Criticism of secularization theory has snowballed since the mid-1980s. Yet, existing literature suggests we should refrain from throwing the baby out with bathwater (Gaskins, Golder, & Siegel, 2013).<sup>2</sup> In their pivotal book *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Norris and Inglehart (2011) unveil the global dynamics of secularization as they highlight differing trends in industrialized nations<sup>3</sup>. They suggest two developments are taking place: the first is in line with the secularization theory: “The publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past fifty years.” Their second argument confirms increasing religiosity: “The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world’s population” (Norris & Inglehart, 2011, p. 5). With these two broad conclusions, they also provide a summary of the state of scholarship. Beyond the debate on secularization theory, there are seemingly opposing trends regarding religion’s role in society that pose a formidable challenge to traditional theories of IR and CP.<sup>4</sup> These opposing trends also now appear to provide unstable ground for the establishment of new theoretical frameworks. This theoretical muddle is one of the key limitations of this research area.

Another issue is related to quantitative methods and the measurement of religion-based variables. Collecting quantitative data on religion is a challenging endeavor due to the intangible and subjective (or context-dependent) nature of the subject area. As the sections on “CASE STUDIES” and “PROTESTERS AND RELIGION: QUESTIONS AND QUESTION MARKS” reveal, religious identities function differently in various political platforms. In addition, most faith-based variables are thick; capturing accurate measurements is a tall order. For instance, Jonathan Fox, in his Religion and State (RAS) dataset (round 3), uses 36 variables to measure religious discrimination against minority religions.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting on the fact that each of the 36 items are coded yearly from 1990 to 2014 using a scale from 0 to 3, one can readily calculate how much work goes into measuring just one set of variables.<sup>6</sup> A similar concern applies to survey data. Several studies on protest and religion have utilized sources such as World Values Survey (WVS) database, Pew Research Center’s data collection on religion and public life, and Arab Barometer.<sup>7</sup> The personal and subjective nature of survey questions on religion and religiosity brings various measurement challenges. For instance, a study focusing on “religiosity” using survey data could seek to analyze responses to a question such as “Do you consider yourself a religious person?” It is unreasonable to assume that respondents’ definition of “religiosity” will overlap with the study’s definition; the gap between respondents’ perspectives and the study’s is inevitable, yet problematic.

In addition, religion could blend with the general worldview of individuals. In some cases it is difficult to draw a line between religious and secular incentives. As Fox suggests, “for many people it is impossible to separate religion from their motivations. It colors their understanding of political and social events as well as the decisions they make. This encompasses political decisions and the decisions to go to war” (Fox, 2004, p. 19). Therefore, works on religious protest face the challenge of identifying what motives and actions are religious in nature. For instance, during Arab uprisings, Friday prayers played a significant role as protests often took place after the prayers (Lynch, 2012). However, it is unre-

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

alistic to assume that there was a blanket religious sentiment motivating every protester as there is a practical component of protesting when people are in close proximity to public squares in their neighborhood.

None the less, despite challenges, there have been significant advances. Theoretical and empirical difficulties have not stopped researchers from seeking answers to questions on religion. We have a better understanding of the role of religion in politics thanks to groundbreaking studies of the 1990s such as *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Juergensmeyer, 1993), *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Johnston & Sampson, 1994), and *Religion in Global Politics* (Haynes, 1998). In the early 2000s, limited means available to support the study of religion emerged as a significant concern, though projects such as RAS, and archiving efforts such as the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), did increase availability and usage of reliable quantitative datasets.<sup>8</sup> The contemporary state of the research field suggests that, despite the blind spots, scholars of religion are making inroads into the puzzles of religion.

Scholarship on protest behavior, like the broader scholarship on religion and politics, had neglected to consider religion-related factors in political mobilization. Recent works underline various aspects of religion and protest nexus. One general, but defining, aspect of this scholarship is the (for lack of a better word) fluidity of religion: that is, religion surfaces in different shapes and forms prior, during, and in the aftermath of, protests. Juergensmeyer et al. (2015) capture the unfixed nature of faith in public-square protests. As they highlight a similar sentiment among protesters in the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the Iranian Green Movement following the 2009 presidential election, they contrast it with other protests, such as those that took place in Tahrir Square.

In Turkey and Iran, the protesters were motivated, in part, by antagonism against government policies that they felt forced religious standards on personal behavior. In other cases, religion was part of the protests themselves, including Christian and Jewish clergy participation in the Occupy Movement, Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox clergy facing each other in the conflicts of Kiev's Independence Square, and moderate Muslim and Coptic Christian support for the protests in Tahrir Square. A mosque adjoining Tahrir became an impromptu medical clinic, and Muslim clergy urged their congregations to join the protests after Friday prayers. In the global era, the citizen-based political protests of civil society are laced with elements of religion. God is in these public squares.

(Juergensmeyer et al., 2015, p. 115)

In order to address the broad presence of religion in protests, the next section organizes scholarship in types of research questions. This provides the opportunity to crystalize different aspects of religion in protests.

# Protesters and Religion: Questions and Question Marks

A strong theoretical base supports the argument that religion and religious actors matter in protests. Several studies ask questions about the role of religion-based variables on protest-related outcomes. At the individual level, religious identity is highlighted because religion is argued to be a prominent source of identity (Little, 1995; Seul, 1999; Shupe, 1990). Seul explains why and how faith shapes identity.

[T]he world's religions answer the individual's need for a sense of locatedness - socially, sometimes geographically, cosmologically, temporally, and metaphysically. Religious meaning systems define the contours of the broadest possible range of relationships - to self; to others near and distant, friendly and unfriendly; to the non-human world; to the universe and to God, or that which one considers ultimately real or true. No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity.

(Seul, 1999, p. 558)

In line with its central role in identity, religion may delineate individual's preferences and facilitate mobilization:

If religion shapes culture, or is shaped by culture, as Weber and Durkheim respectively suggest, then cultural theory offers an important insight into how religion shapes individual preferences. These preferences combine to form the motive for the political mobilization of religious organizations.

(Wald, Silverman, & Fridy, 2005, p. 125)

Expanding on the connection between the belief system of the individual and the nature of mobilization, Abu-Nimer writes:

When religious values, norms and behaviors are an integral part of the interactions between individuals and among groups, then religion helps to construct both the individual's and the group's value system and world-view. If an individual or a group has internalized a set of religious values, these beliefs can motivate changes of attitude and action.

(Abu-Nimer, 2001, pp. 687-688)

Huntington suggested a primordial perspective on religion's role in mobilization: "What ultimately counts for people is not political ideology or economic interest. Faith and family, blood and belief, are what people identify with and what they will fight and die for" (Huntington, 1993, p. 194). All these works and many others zoom into the connection between an individual's religious identity and their motivation to act in a certain way.

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Other researchers seek to explain how nonreligious adversity could trigger religious mobilization. For instance, social tension as well as economic hardship can radicalize groups and facilitate religious dissent (Faksh, 1994). Hasenclever and Rittberger explain how religion turns to a sanctuary at challenging times and how this process centralizes religion's role.

Desperate people subject to poverty, marginalization, or physical threats turn to their religious traditions in search of an alternative political order that satisfies their need for welfare, recognition, and security. In this context, religious communities operate primarily as refuges of solidarity, sources of cultural reaffirmation, and safe havens.

(Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2003, p. 111)

So how does the prominence of religion translate into specific research questions on religious protests? This section aims to provide an overview of the research field under two subsections. In the first, questions on religion as a facilitator of protests are examined. In the second, the focus is on questions on religious protest participants and their goals. Each subsection aims to highlight relevant research questions, findings, and limitations of the particular subsection.

### Religion as a Facilitator of Protest: Structural and Ideological Factors

As Smith (1996, p. 1) put it, “[religion] *can* help to keep everything in its place. But it can *also* turn the world upside-down.” Despite its theoretical appeal, religion's role as a protest facilitator is a relatively new endeavor. *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* stands out as the first comprehensive book that clearly highlights noticeable absence of religion in social movement scholarship. In the introductory chapter of his book, Smith (1996, p. 9) identifies various “religious assets for activism.” These include religion's ability to solve the “problem of motivation” (9); to provide “organizational resources” (13); to “construct and maintain collective identities” (17); to offer favorable “social and geographic positioning” (19); to give legitimacy; and to defend “its institutional self-interest” (21). Expanding on religion's strength in facilitating protest, contributors of the edited volume *Disruptive Religion* collectively highlight faith's capacity to mobilize individuals in different contexts. In addition to making a case for religion as a force of protest in the mid-1990s, the volume stands out due to its broad scope that stretches its geographical focus to various settings such as Poland's Solidarity movement (Osa, 1996), South Africa's anti-apartheid movement (Borer, 1996), the Iranian revolution (Salehi, 1996), and Bolivia's mining communities (Nash, 1996).

Strengths of the volume ironically point challenges of integrating faith-based variables to identify likelihood of protest. Religion travels across different levels of analysis; effortlessly merges with thick concepts such as individual and collective identity as well as ideolo-



## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

gy; and takes different shapes and colors when it surfaces in various social contexts across the globe.

These difficulties have not stopped researchers from examining religion in protests. Many scholars asked questions that aimed to identify aspects of religion as facilitator (or imped-er) of protests. Building on the disruptive religion argument, McVeigh and Sikkink seek to explain under which circumstances “churchgoing Protestants in the United States” ap-prove “contentious tactics.” Among many, one of the significant contributions of this work is recognizing importance of focusing on nature of the belief system. As the authors suc-cessfully connect mobilization theories and aspects of American Protestantism, they lay the groundwork for their analysis. They find “volunteering for church organizations, a perception that religious values are being threatened, a belief that individuals should not have a right to deviate from Christian moral standards, and a belief that humans are in-herently sinful” to be positively associated with approval of “contentious tactics” (McVeigh & Sikkink, 2001, p. 1425).

Adopting the “opportunity vs. grievance” debate of civil war scholarship to their work on religion and protest, Hoffman and Jamal (2014, p. 595) highlight the importance of “reli-gious motivations,” “resources and opportunities linked to religious practice,” and “reli-giously driven *grievances*” in increasing likelihood of protests. They also maintain “reli-gion will make believers less likely to compromise with or accede to the demands of a cor-rupt (or infidel) enemy, whether that enemy is a different religious group or an incumbent regime.” They suggest that religion-related factors could create opportunities and in-crease grievances at the “communal and individual level” (Hoffman & Jamal, 2014, p. 596). Results of their quantitative analysis indicate that when it comes to faith and protest “belief rather than communal practice” mattered in the cases of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings as “mosque attendance is not associated with an increased likelihood of protest” while “Qur’an reading” was related to protest (Hoffman & Jamal, 2014, p. 601).

Similarly, examining role of religion in various Arab States, Achilov (2016, p. 252) sug-gests “political ideology” calibrates the relationship between “Islam” and “collective polit-ical activism.” Connecting various levels of analysis and datasets, Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom (2018) unveil multiple dimensions of religion in relation to protests in their cross-national analysis. They report “the resources available to citizens at the individual level and opportunities provided to religious groups and organizations at country level” are prominent in explaining protests. Diverging somewhat from the findings of Hoffman and Jamal (2014), Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom find “private religious beliefs reduce an individual’s protest potential while involvement in religious networks fosters it.” In addi-tion, religious regulation, appearing in three hypotheses, found to have a negative rela-tionship with protest especially “on the likelihood of religious minorities joining peaceful protest activities” (Arikan & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2018, p. 1). One of the most important con-clusions of this study is the significance of the impact on mobilization of restrictions on religious institutions, that is, “religion can be a significant source of political activism when religious organizations are free to compete with each other” (Arikan & Ben-Nun

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Bloom, 2018, p. 24). This finding intersects with growing research on government involvement in religion (Fox, 2008) and reveals importance of the larger context in understanding faith's influence in contentious politics. Although this subsection aims to pinpoint religion-based independent variables in protest facilitation, it is important to note that a holistic look at belief is crucial in understanding how religion and protest interconnect. So there is need for further research to broaden focus and expand types of datasets and methodologies utilized. Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom (2018) take an important step in this direction.

Another way religion can facilitate protest is through involvement of religious actors. Religious actors may come in different shapes and forms. Religious political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of India or the Ennahda Party of Tunisia, religious organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and religious minorities such as Tibetans in China have the capacity to increase the presence and significance of religion in protests by simply getting involved. The Tibetan resistance movement, due to the juxtaposition of political and religious leadership in the person of the Dalai Lama, is one of the more visible examples of faith-based protests. Although quite different in nature, the Muslim Brotherhood's participation in the 2011 protests in Egypt dialed up the religious tone of the anti-Mubarak uprisings; the Ayodhya dispute and the 2002 Gujarat riots revealed religious fault lines in India. The BJP's engagement in identity politics in some ways deepened the divide. Involvement of religious actors in protests can possibly advance the position of religion in a specific country. The momentum of powerful political movements such as the Tunisian protests in 2011 enabled religious participants to advance through religious political parties such as Ennahda Party in Tunisia. Oftentimes, the tension between secular institutions and religious elements attracts religious actors into social movements.

There has been persistent competition between secular and religious elements in the context of the nation state. Religious actors appear to be functioning as alternatives to secular institutions (and ideologies) of states across the globe. Some of these actors are driving forces behind oppositional movements. Juergensmeyer explains this as a rivalry among religious and secular nationalists in various regions including the Middle East and South Asia. Both groups "claim to be the guarantor of orderliness within a society" and "the ultimate authority for social order" (Juergensmeyer, 1993, p. 33). With differing perspectives on role of religion in society, religious and secular components clash on a broad spectrum of issues.

In her seminal book *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State*, Cesari looks beyond the secular/religious dichotomy and focuses instead on the evolution of religious ideologies and the nation state in the Muslim world. The book highlights differences between the modernization processes of Western and Muslim countries: while religion is privatized in the West, in the Muslim world it is politicized. She suggests that the nation-building process of countries of the Muslim world reveals that "the religion is not only absorbed within state institutions but also is fused with national identity and with the norms of the public space," a state of affairs that she calls "hegemonic

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Islam” (Cesari, 2014, p. xiv). She argues that the conservation of religious institutions in the nation-building process is quite important in understanding the nature of political opposition in the Muslim world and explaining how secretive religious organizations have managed to maintain their influence.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Davis and Robinson (2012, p. 1) describe a “strategy” shared by “successful religiously orthodox movements” which they call “bypassing the state.” Although the scope and focus of the two books differ substantially, this strategy has commonalities with the process explained by Cesari (2014, p. 123) highlighting how “Islamic institutions were able to survive under authoritarian regimes” by becoming “an underground rallying point for political opposition.” Davis and Robinson (2012, p. 1) maintain:

Sidestepping the state, rather than directly confronting it, allows these movements to accomplish their multipronged agendas across the nation, address local needs not being met by the state, empower followers as they work toward the movements’ goals, and for some movements, establish a base of popular support from which to push their agendas in the arena of part politics.

Whether they function underground, or act openly, religious actors can shape the nature and outcome of the protests. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood’s involvement in protests that eventually toppled Mubarak influenced Egyptian politics dramatically. Although, currently not a powerful political force in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliate, the Freedom and Justice Party, were dominant actors until the ousting of President Morsi in 2013.

### Religious Protest Participants and Their Goals

Researchers have posed questions on religious protest participants and their goals: Who engages in religious protests? Why do people protest? What are the goals of protesters? What are faith-based goals? Do churchgoers engage in protest more? What is the role of religious identity in protests? How do belief systems influence protest participation?<sup>10</sup>

Studies addressing these questions reveal the challenges of studying religion in the context of protest. In some cases religious worldviews contrast with a secular establishment. In others, restrictions on religion are associated with various forms of political mobilization. There is also a variation in goals. While some may aim to address a narrow concern, such as a set of religious grievances, others may aim to topple the regime. In line with the “grievance” argument, religious discrimination is examined in connection to protest behavior. Fox (2016) reports a global rise in religious discrimination against religious minorities. Yet, Akbaba and Taydas (2011) find a negative relationship between religious discrimination and ethnic protest. Similarly, Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom (2018, p. 24) find that religious “regulation decreases peaceful protest by minority groups.” In addition to religious discrimination, Fox (2004) studied the role of religious legitimacy and institutions on ethnic protest and other types of political mobilization such as rebellion. Woddis (2011, p. 209), on the other hand, zoomed into “religious protests” against “cultural productions” and the ways that these protests shape “cultural policy.”

### Case Studies

Although, religious protests are mostly associated with the Muslim world, in reality many different faiths intersect with contentious politics (Juergensmeyer, 2008). Therefore, case studies provide crucial context in understanding the religion and protest nexus. While studies highlighted in this section could be easily housed in the previous sections, a separate section on case studies gives further opportunities to reveal details of the faith and protest scholarship across the world.<sup>11</sup> It also elevates context-dependent explanations, which are particularly important to the understanding of this area of research. In addition, this section also segues into the series of case studies underneath this general article.<sup>12</sup> Case studies shed light on numerous questions including, but not limited to, the following: Where does the religious protest take place? What are the attributes of the state where religious protests are taking place? What are the international factors that influence faith-based protests? What are the consequences of religious protests?

Several studies have attempted to understand faith's role in protests across the globe. Students of the Arab world examined linkages between faith and contentious politics.<sup>13</sup> While some of this work is on the role of faith-related factors in Arab uprisings, some highlight the impact of religion on social mobilization patterns in Arab countries in general. There is wide variation in methodological approaches as well: both quantitative and qualitative methods are utilized. Among the quantitative works, survey data sources are used frequently.

Religious symbolism during the uprisings, such as protests that took place right after Friday prayers and the temporary political success in Arab uprising states of religious actors like the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt (Hoffman & Jamal, 2014), suggests that the movement was shaped by religious forces.<sup>14</sup> Various studies have examined role of faith-related factors in Arab uprisings. For instance, Hoffman and Jamal shed light on religion and protest linkages in Tunisia and Egypt. In their compelling analysis, they show personal religiousness to be an influential factor in social mobilization in Tunisia and Egypt. Similarly, the findings of Achilov highlight a link between "Islam and collective action activism" in Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen. More specifically, the study shows that there is a variation in social mobilization of moderate and radical Muslims as "politically moderate Muslims appear more likely to engage in nonviolent, collective political protests, [whereas] political radicals seem less likely to do so" (Achilov, 2016, p. 252).

How do protests change faith-based political dynamics? Do they lead to religious acceptance and democratization? Social forces of change that surface in the form of protest do not always yield to democratization. As the bitter conflict in Syria shows, regional and domestic religious fault lines can hijack the process of peaceful regime change. Therefore, the outcome of any protest is as important as its causes. Grasso's (2011) work provides much-needed context for the relationship between religious and secular components of Tunisian politics in the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution. Tunisia emerged as a success story among the many struggling Arab uprising states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Like other Arab uprising states, Tunisia had experienced the rise of reli-

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

gious actors and political parties. The Ennahda Party of Tunisia managed to retain its political presence, unlike others such as the Freedom and Justice Party of Egypt. Grasso's article acknowledges centrality of religion and religious legitimacy in understanding political dynamics of Tunisia. It also highlights the "new actors in the struggle for the control of the religious field" and the presence of "secular" political actors (Grasso, 2011, p. 200).

The Arab uprisings had taken place "in homogeneous societies as well as monarchies, in modern states as well as traditional tribal nations, in pitifully poor countries as well as oil-rich sheikhdoms" (Wright, 2011, p. 3). As most studies point out, although the uprisings highlighted a common thread running across many Arab states, they also revealed lack of uniformity in terms of the evolution and outcomes of the movements. In addition to the structure and institutions of the state, the engagement of a diverse set of faith-based actors shaped the outcomes of the protests. The uprisings also showed that religion has a complex role in the Muslim world. Wright's book suggests "Muslim societies are moving beyond jihadism" (p. 1) as survey data indicates "declining support for the destructive and disruptive jihadists, even in communities where politics are partly shaped by the Arab-Israeli conflict" (p. 3).

So, how did religion surface in these uprisings? Works on Arab uprisings seem to be channeling the contemporary state of confusion on MENA. From civil wars to crackdowns, the region is in turmoil. As perceptions of domestic threats heighten, religion appears to be a danger to some and a promise to others. In the same vein, relevant works suggest a variation in the roles of faith and oppositional process.

Lynch's work is not solely on the role of faith in the Arab uprisings as he locates various structural influences including, but not limited to, "generational change, new technologies, American leadership, and the regional military balance of power" in the broader picture of protests (Lynch, 2012, p. 5). His wide-angled study reveals changing perspective of religious actors before and during the uprisings. He also explains the role Friday prayers played in the uprisings:

In the weeks that followed Ben Ali's departure, the rhythm of protest synchronized across the region. Each Friday, when Muslims congregated for prayers, became a "day of rage," while episodic protests throughout the week took turns dominating the regional agenda. Al-Jazeera and other regional media covered all of these protests as a single story.

(Lynch, 2012, p. 81)

In her book, Cesari (2014) elucidates religious forces and their impact on the uprisings. Her description intersects with the opportunity argument explained in the section "RELIGIOUS PROTEST PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR GOALS." She suggests that unlike "political opponents," "Islamic institutions became an underground rallying point for political opposition" in many authoritarian Muslim states. She maintains "mosques became spaces for political organization, and religious festivals turned into platforms for opposi-

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

tional political discourse . . . religious authorities also became important actors in this underground resistance” (Cesari, 2014, p. 123).

Another aspect of this scholarship is studies of the faith-related consequences of Arab uprisings. Alterman (2015) highlights the religious dynamics of the region since the uprisings. Contributors to their edited volume collectively make the case that mobilization influenced religious radicalism in the region.

Faith’s influence on social mobilization is also captured by various case studies beyond the Arab world. Research on religion and political engagement in the context of the United States has highlighted the role of religious organizations in citizens’ involvement in politics (Putnam, 2000). Putnam underlines the role of religious institutions as providers of social engagement in American society. Scheufele, Nisbet, and Brossard (2003, p. 300), with an inclusive overview of previous research, suggest that contrary to the emphasis on faith “as an essential catalyst for political participation,” their analysis shows “the cognitive dimension of religion leads to several negative effects on aspects of democratic citizenship” in the case of the United States.

In addition to the role of religious institutions in political mobilization of minority groups such as African Americans (Harris, 1994), the civil rights movement (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984, 1996) emerges as one of the key research agendas on religion and contentious politics in the United States. Morris identified the role of the church in the early years of the civil rights movement in the following words:

The black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provided the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle.

(Morris, 1984, p. 4)

Another area where protest and political engagement intersect is the pro-life movement in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Needless to add, abortion has been at the center of faith-based protest beyond the United States (Clarke, 1987).

There are also studies that focus on specific religious identities and their influence in mobilization in the context of the United States (Wuthnow & Evans, 2002). The United States provides a fertile ground for study of religion and politics due to the curious dualities of religious “[p]olarization and pluralism” (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 6). Yet, these attributes also set the United States apart from other cases discussed as part of protest and religion nexus. Putnam and Campbell suggest that the United States has “solved the puzzle of religious pluralism—the coexistence of religious diversity and devotion” “in the wake of growing religious polarization” “[b]y creating a web of interlocking personal rela-

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

tionships among people of many different faiths” that they call “America’s grace” (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 550). Therefore, religious protests in America do have different undercurrents than the ones that take place in other nations. Case studies on other countries support this argument.

One notable difference is in the way that religion is perceived in a society. In his comparative work, Kalaycioğlu (2007, p. 275) compares Turkey’s experiences as a Muslim-majority state with predominantly Christian states as he focuses on the linkage between “Islamic religiosity” and protest in the case of Turkey. He provides an overview of evolution of political Islam in Turkey with a focus on changing relations between secularists and conservatives. Turkey proves to be an intriguing country in the context of religion and protest since “Islamic values and religiosity seem to play a major role in determining political protest in Turkey, by forestalling rather than fostering it” (Kalaycioğlu, 2007, p. 289). Despite this unexpected connection between religion and protest, Kalaycioğlu reports that

religious interest groups have been quite successful in lobbying governments and the Turkish Grand National Assembly. They have also been quite successful in establishing powerful links with a variety of political parties and influencing the selection of parliamentary deputies and cabinet ministers.

(Kalaycioğlu, 2007, pp. 289–290)

Clash and competition between secular and religious constituents of the state has been associated with the rise of political Islam in Turkey (Taydas, Akbaba, & Morrison, 2012). To a certain extent, nature and evolution of this rivalry shapes the point of intersection between religion and protest in the country.

When religion is an important identifier of a group, it could facilitate protest. Luo and Andreas (2016, p. 479) delve into role of religion for political mobilization of a specific religious minority, the Hui in China, “to advance economic demands.” They highlight ideational and structural components of religious influence in protest. They suggest “economic concerns . . . were augmented by religious sentiment” and structural aspects such as access to mosques, and the presence of religious leadership eased mobilization (Luo & Andreas, 2016, p. 494). Although this study differs from work of Kalaycioğlu (2007) as it focuses on a religious minority, both studies tackle the state’s perception of religion.

It is important to note that there is a variation in scope of case studies. Many scholars zoomed into a specific aspect of religion in the context of a single case. For example, Park’s (2015) book examines the intersection between Korean religious groups and protest during Japanese colonial rule. Similarly, Borer’s (1998) work on role of religious actors in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa explores the actions of the South African Council of Churches and the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference. Likewise, Sweet’s (2015) work on Russia examines the complex role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in the history of social activism, with a focus on the 2011–2012 protests. The ROC emerges as an important example of how religious actors can grant legitimacy

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

to regimes and help them maintain political power. Hafez (2003), on the other hand, broadly looks at rebellion in the Muslim world. Despite variation in scope, case studies on protest and religion mirror some of the accomplishments and challenges of the research field, that is, despite its undeniable presence and power, religion is not a firmly established variable in political mobilization research. In the same vein, different political contexts, religious actors, and sources of discontent yield to different outcomes. Explaining circumstances and/or undercurrents of mobilization, as most of these case studies do, provides a much-needed context on protest and religion scholarship.

## Conclusion

No consensus has yet emerged as to how religion influences protests. Although such a consensus may never arrive to this field, there is agreement on the idea that the religion and protest nexus is, despite empirical and theoretical difficulties, well worth examining further. Larger scholarship on religion and politics progressed beyond its impasse by investing more in theoretical frameworks and expanding the availability of accurate qualitative and quantitative data. Following these footsteps, this research field could be improved by prioritizing the basics—theory and data availability. As Hoffman and Jamal (2014, p. 605) underlined when reviewing the implications of their findings on Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the next chapter of “Arab politics” is likely to comprise “religion,” and so they encourage researchers to “rethink the classical assumptions about religion and democracy.” Rethinking seemingly well-established assumptions, advancing existing research initiatives and investing in projects that will elevate research design of works of this field, can help improve research on religious protests.

## References

- Abu-Nimer, M. (2001). **Conflict resolution, culture and religion: Toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding**. *Journal of Peace Research*, 38(6), 685–704.
- Achilov, D. (2016). **Revisiting political Islam: Explaining the nexus between political Islam and contentious politics in the Arab world**. *Social Science Quarterly*, 97(2), 252–270.
- Akbaba, Y., & Taydas, Z. (2011). **Does religious discrimination promote dissent? A quantitative analysis**. *Ethnopolitics*, 10(3–4), 271–295.
- Alterman, J. B. (2015). *Religious radicalism after the Arab uprisings*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield/Center for Strategic & International Studies.
- Arikan, G., & Ben-Nun Bloom, P. (2018). **Religion and political protest: A cross-country analysis**. *Comparative Political Studies*.
- Borer, T. A. (1996). **Church leadership, state repression, and the “Spiral of Involvement” in the South African Anti-apartheid movement, 1983–1990**. In Christian



## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 125–143). London, U.K.: Routledge.

Borer, T. A. (1998). *Challenging the state: Churches as political actors in South Africa, 1980–1994*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Casanova, J. (1994). *Public religions in the modern world*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Cesari, J. (2014). *The awakening of Muslim democracy: Religion, modernity, and the state*. Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Clarke, A. (1987). **Moral protest, status defence and the anti-abortion campaign.** *British Journal of Sociology*, 38(2), 235–253.

Davis, N. J., & Robinson, R. V. (2012). *Claiming society for God: Religious movements and social welfare*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Faksh, M. A. (1994). **The prospects of Islamic fundamentalism in the post-Gulf War period.** *International Journal*, 49(2), 183–218.

Fox, J. (2001). **Religion as an overlooked element of international relations.** *International Studies Review*, 3(3), 53–73.

Fox, J. (2004). *Religion, civilization and civil war: 1945 through the new millennium*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Fox, J. (2008). *A world survey of religion and the state*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, J. (2016). *The unfree exercise of religion: A world survey of discrimination against religious minorities*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Fox, J., & Sandler, S. (2004). *Bringing religion into international relations*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gaskins, B., Golder, M., & Siegel, D. A. (2013). **Religious participation, social conservatism, and human development.** *Journal of Politics*, 75(4), 1125–1141.

Grasso, A. (2011). **Religion and political activism in post-revolutionary Tunisia.** *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 39, 197–220.

Hafez, M. M. (2003). *Why Muslims rebel: Repression and resistance in the Islamic world*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Harris, F. C. (1994). **Something within: Religion as a mobilizer of African-American political activism.** *Journal of Politics*, 56(1), 42–68.

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

- Hasenclever, A., & Rittberger, V. (2003). Does religion make a difference? Theoretical approaches to the impact of faith on political conflict. In H. Pavlos & F. Petit (Eds.), *Religion in international relations: The return from exile* (pp. 107–145). Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Haynes, J. (1998). *Religion in global politics*. London: Routledge.
- Hoffman, M., & Jamal, A. (2014). **Religion in the Arab Spring: Between two competing narratives**. *Journal of Politics*, 76(3), 593–606.
- Huntington, S. P. (1993). If Not Civilizations, What? Paradigms of the Post-Cold War World. *Foreign Affairs*, 72(5), 186–194.
- Johnston, D., & Sampson, C. (Eds.). (1994). *Religion, the missing dimension of statecraft*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (1993). *The new Cold War? Religious nationalism confronts the secular state*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Juergensmeyer, M. (2008). *Global rebellion: Religious challenges to the secular state, from Christian militias to Al Qaeda*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Juergensmeyer, M., Griego, D., & Soboslai, J. (2015). *God in the tumult of the global square: Religion in global civil society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kalaycioğlu, E. (2007). **Religiosity and protest behaviour: The case of Turkey in comparative perspective**. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 9(3), 275–291.
- Little, D. (1995). Belief, Ethnicity and Nationalism. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 1(2), 284–301.
- Luo, Q., & Andreas, J. (2016). **Using religion to resist rural dispossession: A case study of a Hui Muslim community in north-west China**. *China Quarterly*, 226, 477–498.
- Lynch, M. (2012). *The Arab uprisings: The unfinished revolutions of the new Middle East*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.
- McAdam, D. (1982.) *Political process and the development of Black insurgency: 1930–1970*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- McVeigh, R., & Sikkink, D. (2001). **God, politics, and protest: Religious beliefs and the legitimization of contentious tactics**. *Social Forces*, 79(4), 1425–1458.
- Morris, A. D. (1984). *The origins of the civil rights movement: Black communities organizing for change*. New York, NY: Free Press.

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

- Morris, A. D. (1996). The Black church in the civil rights movement: The SCLC as the decentralized, radical arm of the Black church. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 29–46). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Nash, J. (1996). Religious rituals of resistance and class consciousness in Bolivian tin-mining communities. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 87–102). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2011). *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Osa, M. (1996). Pastoral mobilization and contention: The religious foundations of the Solidarity movement in Poland. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 67–85). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Park, A. L. (2015). *Building a heaven on Earth: Religion, activism, and protest in Japanese-occupied Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Pavlos, H., & Petit, F. (Eds.). (2003). *Religion in international relations: The return from exile*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Putnam, R. D., & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American grace: How Religion divides and unites us*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Sahliyah, E. (Ed.). (1990). *Religious resurgence and politics in the contemporary world*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Salehi, M. M. (1996). Radical Islamic insurgency in the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 47–63). London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Sandal, N., & Fox, J. (2013) *Religion in international relations theory: Interactions and possibilities*. London, U.K.: Routledge.
- Scheufele, D. A., Nisbet, M. C., & Brossard, D. (2003). **Pathways to political participation? Religion, communication contexts, and mass media.** *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 15(3), 300–324.
- Seul, R. J. (1999) **“Ours is the way of God”: Religion, identity and intergroup conflict.** *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(5), 553–569.
- Shupe, A. (1990) The stubborn persistence of religion in the global arena. In E. Sahliyah (Ed.), *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World* (pp. 17–26). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

## Protest and Religion: An Overview

---

Smith, C. (1996). Correcting a curious neglect, or bringing religion back in. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Disruptive religion: The force of faith in social movement activism* (pp. 1–25). London, U.K.: Routledge.

Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1985). *The future of religion: Secularization, revival and cult formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sweet, J. (2015). **The Russian Orthodox Church and social movement protests: Is unity possible?** *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, 5(4), 77–85.

Taydas, Z., Akbaba, Y., & Morrison, M. K. C. (2012). **Did secularism fail? The rise of religion in Turkish politics.** *Politics and Religion*, 5(3), 528–554.

Toft, M. D., Philpott, D., & Shah, T. S. (2011). *God's century: Resurgent religion and global politics*. W.W. Norton: New York, NY.

Wald, K. D., Silverman, A. L., & Fridy, K. S. (2005). **Making sense of religion in political life.** *Annual Review of Political Science*, 8, 121–143.

Woddis, J. (2011). **Religious protest and its impact on cultural policy.** *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 17(2), 209–224.

Wright, R. (2011). *Rock the Casbah: Rage and rebellion across the Islamic world*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Wuthnow, R., & Evans, J. H. (Eds.). (2002). *The quiet hand of God: Faith-Based activism and the public role of mainline Protestantism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

### Notes:

(1.) It is important to note that there are overlaps across the two sections. The purpose of the organization is not to identify mutually exclusive divisions, but rather to provide overview of the scholarship under specific questions.

(2.) By the mid-1990s, many scholars were critical of securitization theory. Yet, some were worried about abandoning the theory too quickly. In his book, Casanova (1994) successfully captures the debate on securitization of mid-1990s.

(3.) This is the second edition of the book, which was originally published in 2004.

(4.) Sandal and Fox (2013) successfully address some of these theoretical roadblocks.

(5.) Different versions of RAS dataset are utilized by some of the works cited in this paper. Downloads of RAS are available online.

(6.) Codebook of the dataset includes further information.

## **Protest and Religion: An Overview**

---

(7.) For more information on WVS visit their website. For more information on the Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life visit Featured Religion Data. For more information on Arab Barometer visit their website.

(8.) More information on ARDA can be found on their website.

(9.) Chapters 7 through 9 of Cesari (2014) provide clear overview of the oppositional process before and after the Arab uprisings.

(10.) As the case studies will reveal, most of what we know as a response to these questions comes from single studies on religious protests. Although limited, cross-country analyses do exist. For instance, Arikan and Ben-Nun Bloom (2018, p. 1), in their cross-country analysis, find a negative relationship between “private religious beliefs” and “individual’s protest potential.” See the case studies for further discussion on these questions in the context of specific countries.

(11.) Some of the case studies are also discussed in previous sections in order to provide an overview of a specific scholarship.

(12.) The following articles of this volume provide a detailed look at religion and protest in the United States (Munson, forthcoming), China (Tao, forthcoming), and Poland (Kosicki, forthcoming).

(13.) It is important to note that this section is not solely on single case studies. Many of the works on Arab and/or Muslim world are cross-country case studies that shed light on beyond a single case.

(14.) There is no consensus on role of religion in Arab uprisings. For a different perspective on this see Wright (2011).

(15.) See Munson’s work in this volume.

**Yasemin Akbaba**

Department of Political Science, Gettysburg College