CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Ministering at the Altar of Slavery": Religious slavery conflict and social movement repression

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Abstract

Why did some American Protestant denominations experience slavery-related schism during the nineteenth century, while others appear to have been unaffected by slavery conflict? I conduct a comparative case study of four national Protestant denominations and find that slavery-related schism was not a consequence of a particular theological orientation, but instead occurred when denominational leaders lacked the capacity to repress abolitionism. In all four denominations, leaders attempted to stifle the abolition movement to avoid conflict. Their capacities to do so differed, however: in some denominations, diffusely distributed authority created openings for abolitionist mobilization, eventually leading to irreconcilable conflict and schism. In other denominations, concentrated authority enabled repression, leaders blocked abolitionist mobilization, and schism was avoided. This research shows that non-state targets of social movements can use "soft" forms of repression to undermine movement mobilization, but that their capacity to do so is constrained by organizational characteristics. It also demonstrates the critical role of organizational dynamics in shaping religious responses to contentious issues more broadly.

During the three decades before the American civil war, abolitionists targeted churches as well as the state. Wishing to purify their religious communities from the sin of slavery and gain moral support in their political struggle, abolitionists pressured church leaders to oppose slavery. The fate of these church-centered abolition movements differed across denominations. In some churches, abolitionists caused intense conflict and eventual schism. In others, abolitionists had little impact and denominational unity was preserved. In this article, I explain why only some denominations experienced major sectional schisms over slavery.

Niebuhr (1922: 191–9), Ahlstrom (2004: 657–68), and Randall and Donald (1961: 25–6) suggested that the slavery-related schisms in the Baptist and Methodist churches were the result of rising opposition to slavery. Meanwhile, Manross (1943: 347) and Fife (1960: 143) argued that the Protestant Episcopal Church (PEC) and The Disciples of Christ avoided schism because they regarded intervention in social problems as outside the purview of the church. Taken together, these

accounts suggest that schism occurred when rising support for abolition clashed with the status quo of slavery, and this explanation is thus consistent with prevailing accounts of denominational support for abolition more generally, which emphasize the role of theology. King and Haveman (2008) and Budros (2011) argue that "this-worldly" theology nourished abolitionism, while "other-worldly" theology led to dis-engagement with worldly matters, including the problem of slavery. The distinction between "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" theology follows from Weber (1993). Patterson (1982) also attributed some of slavery's broader success in America to the growth of evangelical "other-worldliness" during the colonial and antebellum periods.

This-worldly antislavery fervor does not, alone, appear to explain church schism, however. Opposition to slavery existed in churches that did not have schisms, and it also existed in churches characterized by other-worldly theology. What distin-guishes churches with schism from those that avoided it is that abolitionists in churches with schism made demands that interfered with national denominational business and provoked proslavery backlash, leading to movement–countermove-ment conflict that targeted national church agencies. In churches that did not expe-rience schism, abolitionists failed to disrupt national denominational affairs over their grievances, proslavery had no need to mobilize, and churches went on to tol-erate slavery with no apparent obstacles. Thus, slavery-related church schism can be seen as a case of successful abolitionist mobilization.

In this article, I show that abolitionist success depended on the opportunity struc-tures of each denomination—and, specifically, on the opportunities for mobilization created by low repressive capacity in some churches (McAdam 1996; Amenta et al. 2010; Luders 2010; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). I find that leaders in each denomination feared the divisive impacts of slavery conflict and attempted to stifle abolitionism to prevent it, but that low concentrations of authority in some churches enabled abolitionists to circumvent repression, leading to sustained mobilization, proslavery backlash, and eventual schism.

Repression by states can reduce or prevent mobilization (Eisinger 1973; Earl 2003; McAdam 1982). While churches cannot violently repress protesters as states can (Walker et al. 2008; Earl 2011), "soft" forms of repression can also prevent mobili-zation (Ferree 2005). I find that non-violent forms of repression such as silencing chal-lengers, denying them professional opportunities, or discrediting them chilled abolitionist mobilization in some denominations. Just as state structures influence state capacities for repression (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), organizational structures influ-enced organizational capacities for repression: when authority was highly concentrated, leaders were able to block abolitionist mobilization. When, on the other hand, authority was more diffusely distributed throughout an organization, leaders failed to suppress abolitionism and the movement flourished despite leaders' opposition.

American slavery and church-centered abolitionism

A first wave of antislavery activism ended British and US involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Many Americans believed that this change would end slavery gradually, but instead the nineteenth century saw rapid growth in the enslaved population and increasing Southern eco-nomic reliance on slavery (Davis 1999; Fogel 1989; Kolchin 2003). Between the end

of the slave trade and the civil war, the population of enslaved people in the United States tripled, reaching nearly four million by 1860 (Fogel and Engerman 1995; Smith 1998).

A second wave of antislavery activism developed in the 1830s: the immediatism of Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and their colleagues who were committed to the immediate and total abolition of slavery. As this "radical" abolitionism developed into a national movement, proslavery forces in America rallied an ideological counter-movement. Proslavery ideology crystalized after the thirties, marked by a proliferation of writing in defense of slavery from both the North and South, which included the development of Biblical arguments in favor of slavery (Noll 2006; Tise 1975).

While some abolitionists targeted the state, others targeted religious organizations. Known as "church-centered abolitionists," these activists demanded that their churches take a stand against slavery. They disrupted church meetings, organized antislavery societies, engaged in letter writing campaigns, petitioned religious conventions, and distributed abolitionist literature (McKivigan 1984). They threatened to withdraw from churches that tolerated slavery, and often did so. In response, slaveholders and their supporters mobilized a countermovement to challenge this moral assault and prevent the adoption of antislavery church policies. Proslavery activists demanded that churches morally legitimize slavery and declare slaveholding compatible with Christian piety. Like the abolitionists, they backed their demands with the threat of withdrawal from the churches (McKivigan 1984; Davis 2006). In some denominations, conflict between antislavery and proslavery forces became insurmountable and sectional schism followed.

Schism did not occur in every denomination, however, and in this article I explain why. I analyze archival data from four national protestant denominations: two churches that experienced denominational schism and two churches without schism, which were similar in terms of in their formal polity structure and the proportion of their congregations in slaveholding states. I examine the records of national church agencies, augmented by primary and secondary accounts of these bodies and their affairs, focusing on instances of slavery-related conflict as well as events that could have triggered conflict—but did not.

This article is organized as follows. I begin by introducing the dominant explanation for church positions on slavery, *this-worldly theology*, and the implications of this explanation for denominational schism. I then introduce an alternative explanation using insights from political opportunity theory. In the third section, I describe my analytic approach and introduce my cases. In the fourth section, I bring data to bear on the competing explanations. Subsequently, I summarize the results of the analysis and consider a possible objection, that the geographic distributions of church congregations might explain denominational schism. Finally, I conclude by discussing the implications of this research for our understanding of social movement repression, especially by non-state targets, and for research on religion and politics.

This-worldly theology and denominational schism

In his *Protestant Ethic*, Weber (1930) articulates an idealist view of religion: religion affects social life because theology shapes individual beliefs, which in turn motivate actions. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination led to the development of modern

western capitalism because individuals sought assurance of their election in their financial success, and therefore labored industriously while eschewing lavish enjoyment of wealth. Orlando Patterson (1982: 70–6) echoed Weber's idealism when he attributed slavery's success in the American South in part to evangelical Protestantism. Patterson considered the preponderance of evangelical "other-worldliness" an important precondition for slavery's success in America, since it allowed Christians to interpret salvation in purely spiritual terms while accepting the ugliness of worldly conditions, including racialized slavery (73).

The distinction between "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" religion, which follows from Weber (1993), was also used by King and Haveman (2008) in their analysis of denominational differences in antislavery activism and by Budros (2011) in his study of early emancipation. While Patterson focused on broad patterns in American religion, King and Haveman (2008) and Budros (2011) focused on denominational differences in worldliness, which they suggest led to varied rates of antislavery across the denominations: this-worldly churches sought to redeem society and therefore saw abolition as consistent with their spiritual aims, while other-worldly churches emphasized individual salvation and discouraged engagement in "secular" political controversies. Ahlstrom (2004: 657–68), Manross (1943: 347), and Fife (1960: 143) all described the absence of schism in some churches in a similar way: they suggested that indifference toward worldly matters prevented the emergence abolition in some churches and, with it, the impetus for schism.

The "worldliness" explanation suggests that, since there should be little opposition to slavery in other-worldly churches, they should go on tolerating the status quo of slavery and avoid schism. On the other hand, members and clergy in this-worldly denominations should be much more likely to engage in abolitionist activism. Unless a this-worldly church is completely unified in opposition to slavery, a greater level of engagement with abolitionism should lead to greater conflict and an increase in the propensity toward schism in these churches.

Church repressive capacity: An alternative account of denominational schism

Slavery-related grievances alone did not cause denominational schism. For antislavery views to lead to schism, they had to be manifested in open and irreconcilable conflict between abolitionists and the proslavery countermovement. Thus, in order to understand why slavery-related schism occurred in some churches but not in others, it is necessary to explain the emergence and extent of movement–countermovement conflict and not simply the presence of antislavery views. According to Meyer and Staggenborg (1996), movement–countermovement conflict occurs when two (or more) opposing movements each encounter political opportunities that facilitate mobilization, while neither movement achieves all its aims. McAdam (1996: 27), synthesizing several earlier articulations, described political opportunity as having four basic dimensions: the openness of the political system to challengers, the stability of elite alignments, the presence of elite allies, and the target's capacity for repression.

While McAdam's conceptualization referred to movements that target states, political opportunity theory has been extended to social movements targeting

non-state organizations like churches, schools, and corporations (Kurzman 1998; Walker et al. 2008; Van Dyke et al. 2004; Jasper & Poulsen 1993; King 2008). Kurzman (1998) adapted McAdam's conceptualization of political opportunity to religious targets specifically and further distilled the essential elements into two dimensions of "organizational opportunity": first, an "attitudinal" dimension, entailing leaders' support for movement aims; and second, an "authority" dimension, entailing leaders' capacities to block a movement they do not support.

Applied to the present case, the "organizational opportunities" perspective suggests that movement–countermovement conflict should have emerged in two circumstances. First, along the attitudinal dimension, movement–countermovement conflict would emerge when elites were divided, with some—but not all—supporting abolition, since this would mean that both opposing movements would find a portion of leaders sympathetic to their cause but would not find their demands totally satisfied (Eisinger 1973; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Second, along the authority dimension, if leaders were united in opposition to abolitionist aims, opportunities for mobilization would still exist when leaders lacked the authority to prevent their mobilization. Thus, there are two possible paths to schism that each require consideration: partial support for abolition from church leaders, and a lack of repressive capacity.

Leaders' support for abolition

McAdam (1982: 26) points out that divisions among elites diminish as the threat posed by a social movement increases. Social movements that target the political sphere generate a threat to the social order and the elites privileged by that arrangement. Movements that target organizations, on the other hand, generate another kind of threat: the threat to the survival of those organizations (which also entails a threat to the privileged position of organizational elites). Selznick (1949: 256) warned that organizations necessarily become invested in self-preservation, a goal that can even supplant the organization's very mission. In the words of Michels (1915: 338), "from a means, organization becomes an end." In this context, threats to the organization should reduce divisions among leaders and cause unified opposition to social movement activity, just as threats to the larger social order diminish divisions among political elites.

According to Luders (2010: 13), organizations threatened by social movement activity determine their responses strategically, weighing the relative costs associated with concession and resistance. Leaders will tend to oppose a social movement when concessions are costly, as when an opposing countermovement threatens a powerful backlash. In the context of the abolition and proslavery movements, threat to religious organizations should have thus unified leaders in their opposition to whichever movement was weaker and conceded to the movement that was stronger (McAdam 1982; Luders 2010).

By the 1830s, there was no measurable support for abolition in the antebellum South (Stampp 1943), but there *was* support for slavery in the North, as reflected in the violence and vandalism perpetrated by Northern anti-abolition mobs (Harrold 1995; Richards 1970). Membership in antislavery societies throughout the nation was small; in 1838 it was probably between 72,000 (AASS 1838: 129–52) and

150,000 (Birney 1838: 7), less than 1% of the combined white and free Black population of the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1840). While the ratio of abolitionists to proslavery may have differed across the churches, the small size of the abolition movement and widespread support for slavery throughout the South makes it exceedingly unlikely that abolitionists ever outnumbered the proslavery faction. Thus, for abolitionist to ever rival the threat posed by proslavery, they would have to develop tremendous movement power. Accordingly, if church leaders did indeed behave strategically, they should have opposed abolitionism in all the churches, at least in the early stages of movement activity, regardless of theological differences. In other words, opportunities for social movement mobilization along the "attitudinal" dimension would have been low across the churches (Kurzman 1998).

Leaders' capacities to repress

Even if attitudinal opportunities for abolitionism were low, however, activists may have still encountered favorable opportunities in the form of low repressive capacity (Kurzman 1998). Tilly (1978: 100) considers repression "any action by another group which raises the contender's cost of collective action." Using this broad definition, organizational targets can repress by excluding challengers, denying them benefits of participation, or using moral authority to discredit movement aims. These "soft" forms of repression can shape movement outcomes but, without sufficient authority, leaders may not have recourse to these tactics (Walker et al. 2008; Earl 2011; Ferree 2005).

According to Chaves (1993), church authority is of two types: *agency authority*, the rational-legal structure that allows leaders to withhold the benefits of participation; and *religious authority,* which makes recourse to the supernatural for its legitimation. While churches with high levels of agency authority can fire clergy or exclude members, churches with high levels of religious authority may be able to quell dissent by declaring movement goals or activity sinful. Chaves notes that religious authority can be either traditional (as in the case of Bishops who occupy a post traditionally endowed with spiritual authority) or charismatic (owing to the personal qualities of the leader). This distinction between religious and agency authority suggests that there may be two paths to the repression of social movement conflict within churches: one operating primarily through the rational-legal exclusion of challengers and another operating through the power of authoritative moral sanctioning.

Schism as repressive failure

Drawing together these insights on repression as a determinant of movement–countermovement conflict (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; McAdam 1996; Kurzman 1998), I suggest that the slavery-related schisms in some nineteenth century Protestant churches are explained by leaders' limited capacities to repress internal social movement activity. I suggest that repressing the abolition movement was a strategic choice made by leaders regardless of theological orientation (Luders 2010), but that opportunities for abolitionist mobilization (and subsequent

proslavery countermobilization) remained open when organizational authority was not highly concentrated (Kurzman 1998; McAdam 1996), as when there were multiple channels of influence within a church or when lower-level clergy had legitimate means to challenge or overturn top officials' policies. In contrast, sufficiently concentrated church authority enabled leaders to punish challengers and block abolitionist mobilization, which also prevented proslavery countermobilization (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). In the absence of conflict between the two opposing movements, denominations with high repressive capacity avoided schism.

Research strategy

I have outlined two explanations for slavery-related denominational schism: this-worldly theology and repressive capacity. To evaluate the worldliness explanation, I use the congruence method and show that the predictions of the theory do not match the evidence (George and Bennett 2005: 181–92). Data for this analysis comes from the US Census of Religious Bodies (1850), from secondary sources (King and Haveman 2008; Ahlstrom 2004; Scherer 1975; Heathcote 1919; McKivigan 1984; Engelder 1964), and from denominational meeting minutes (Methodist Episcopal Church 1855; PEC 1785–1862).

Subsequently, I use process-tracing to evaluate the repressive capacity account using data from case studies of four large, national Protestant denominations. Process-tracing takes advantage of temporality and causal mechanisms to show how different factors led to an outcome of interest (George and Bennett 2005: 152–79, Mahoney 2003: 363–5, Beach and Pedersen 2013: 1–3). Process-tracing can also be used comparatively to develop and test explanations across multiple cases, a process sometimes referred to as "narrative comparison" (Mahoney 1999: 1164–9, Mahoney 2003: 365–7, Lange 2013: 96–8).

I selected my cases from among those denominations that had at least 1,000 congregations in 1850 (US Census 1850), as shown in Table 1. I first selected two cases in which the outcome of interest (pre-civil war sectional schism) occurred. There were three cases of sectional schism, the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (Ahlstrom 2004: 659–61, McKivigan 1984: 74–92). Complexities specific to the Presbyterian case[1] put them beyond the scope of this article, leaving the Methodists and the Baptists remaining. I analyzed the historical trajectories of both denominations. To extend my argument, I selected two negative cases—additional denominations that did not experience a major national schism (Emigh 1997). I used a most-similar systems logic to "match" negative cases to positive cases that were otherwise similar.

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[1]Slavery played a role in the Presbyterian schism of 1837, but ecclesiastical and theological issues were the primary cause (Adams 1992, Christie and Dumond 1969, Goen 1985, Moorhead 2000, Staiger 1949). Considering this event a "slavery-related schism" is therefore dubious. Following the separation, New School Presbyterians had a slavery-related schism in 1857 while the Old School Presbyterians remained unified until the civil war. A preliminary analysis of the New and Old School Presbyterian cases confirms the argument I present here, but space limitations prevent a thorough discussion given the complexities introduced by the 1837 schism. Thus, I excluded the Presbyterians from the present study but they remain an important case for future research.

Table 1. American Denominations with more than 1,000 Congregations in 1850

Denomination	Outcome: Schism	Proportion of Congregations in Slaveholding States	Formal Polity Structure
Baptist	Yes	60%	Congregational
Methodist	Yes	52%	Episcopalian
Presbyterian	Yes	38%	Presbyterian
Episcopalian	No	40%	Episcopalian
Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches)	No	37%	Congregational
Lutheran	No	19%	Presbyterian
Quaker	No	12%	Congregational
Congregationalists	No	0%	Congregational

Sources: US Census of Religious Bodies (1850), Moberg (1962).
Notes: Presbyterians were not selected as a case because of scholarly debate over the causes of 1837 schism and subsequent complexities in analyzing splinter groups. It was not possible to closely match all cases by geographic distribution, so I revisit the possible influence of geography after the case study section of this article.

I aimed to match cases with respect to formal polity structure and the proportion of congregations in slaveholding states, as shown in Table 1 (Tarrow 2010: 234–5, Przeworski and Teune 1970: 32–4, Seawright and Gerring 2008: 304–6). Formal polity structure is closely related to denominational authority and hence relevant to the explanation that I propose. There are three basic church polity types (Moberg 1962: 94). In congregational polities, there is no national policy-making unit; congregations may communicate, cooperate, and influence one another but are, at least formally speaking, autonomous. Presbyterian polities are governed through a series of nested hierarchical bodies, whose members are representatives from lower judicatories. Episcopal polities are also hierarchical, but Bishops form the top of the governance structure and gain their authority through apostolic succession. As is clear from Table 1, formal polity was not correlated with denominational schism. This does not mean that *authority* did not matter for church schism, however, since decoupling between formal and informal authority structures has been well documented in churches, as in other organizations (McMullen 1994; Harrison 1959). Further, the absence of a clear correlation between polity and schism does not preclude interaction between polity and other factors leading to schism (Lieberson 1991: 1220–1). To ensure that polity-specific patterns did not obscure the determinants of schism, I matched non-schism cases to schism cases by polity type.

The proportion of congregations in slaveholding states was another important matching criteria; since it is reasonable to imagine that geography played a role in denominational conflict, it would be desirable to "control" for this variation (Przeworski and Teune 1970: 33). Unfortunately, no negative cases matched the positive cases closely. I reduced variation as much as possible by selecting non-schism cases with the largest proportion of congregations in the South. Using these two matching criteria, polity type and proportion of congregations in the South, I selected the Disciples of Christ and the PEC as my two non-schism cases.

Table 2. Predictions of the Worldliness Hypothesis for Denominations with at least 1,000 Congregations in 1850

Denomination	Worldliness	Enacted Durable Antislavery Policy	Schism Predicted	Schism Observed
Baptist	Other-worldly	No	No	Yes
Methodist	Other-worldly	No	No	Yes
Presbyterian	This-worldly	No	Yes	Yes
Congregationalists	This-worldly	No	Yes	No
Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches)	This-worldly	No	Yes	No
Episcopalian	This-worldly	No	Yes	No
Lutheran	Other-worldly	No	No	No
Quaker	This-worldly	Yes	No*	No

*Schism is not predicted for Quakers despite this-worldliness because they reached consensus in support for abolition (Scherer 1975: 131).

Sources: US Census of Religious Bodies (1850), King and Haveman (2008: 502), Ahlstrom (2004:658–68), Scherer (1975: 68–72, 131,136–7), Heathcote (1919: 40–69), McKivigan (1984: 18–35, 57–73), Engelder (1964: 54, 92–117), Protestant Episcopal Church (1785–1862), Methodist Episcopal Church (1855).

Given the differences that remained between schism and non-schism cases in the proportion of congregations in the South, however, geography cannot entirely be ruled out as a possible explanatory factor without evidence from the case studies, so I evaluate its impact following the case study section of this article.

Data for the case studies consisted of national denominational meeting minutes where available, augmented by additional primary and secondary sources. Other primary sources included religious pamphlets and magazines, sermons, personal journals, and autobiographies. Secondary sources included denominational histories, biographies of church leaders and abolitionists, studies of religion and slavery, and histories of the slavery debates within individual churches. While this article focuses on the thirty years prior to the civil war, the central legislative bodies of the Episcopalians and Methodists have longer histories and I examined records going back to the founding of the autonomous American churches.

Evaluating this-worldliness as an explanation for schism

In this section, I use the congruence method (George and Bennet 2005: 181–92) to assess whether "this-worldliness" (King and Haveman 2008; Budros 2011) can explain church schism. Extending the worldliness argument to denominational schism, this-worldly churches should have been more preoccupied with worldly matters and therefore had higher levels of conflict and a greater likelihood of schism, unless they were united in a commitment to end slavery. The data do not support this hypothesis. Using King and Haveman's characterizations of the churches' theological orientations, as shown in Table 2, this-worldly churches were not more likely to experience schisms.

King and Haveman consider the Baptists and Methodists "other-worldly," but these denominations experienced intense conflict and sectional schism. At the same time, King and Haveman describe the Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, and Episcopalians as "this-worldly," which should have left them preoccupied with worldly matters. In fact, these denominations had lower levels of conflict—and not because they were united in opposition to slavery, as is evident in the lack of a durable antislavery policy. Comparing these data to the predictions of the worldliness account suggests that this-worldliness is not an adequate explanation for denominational schism.

Evaluating repressive capacity as an explanation for schism

I now turn to the case studies to evaluate the role of church repressive capacity in slavery-related schism. I begin by analyzing the schism cases. For both Methodists and Baptists, I document leaders' attempts at repression and show how they failed to reduce abolitionist mobilization, thereby allowing conflict to escalate and eventually lead to schism. I then provide evidence showing that, despite differences in their formal polity structures, these denominations were both characterized by low repressive capacity.

After evaluating the schism cases, I bring in non-schism cases for comparison. Since existing explanations for the lack of conflict among Disciples and Episcopalians frame low conflict as an expression of indifference toward the problem of slavery (e.g., Ahlstrom: 666–7, Fife 1960; Manross 1943), I first document challenges to slavery that *did* take place within these churches. These challenges, like Skocpol's (1979: 37) "non-social-revolutionary political crises," serve as instances in which conflict *could* have resulted but did not. I then show that, far from being neutral, church leaders silenced racial justice advocates to prevent Southern backlash and that these repressive actions succeeded in reducing abolitionist mobilization. Subsequently, I document how the concentration of authority was necessary for successful repression.

Methodist antislavery accommodates the world

The Methodists, a denomination with an episcopal polity structure that experienced rapid growth during the antebellum period, faced intense national conflict over slavery that culminated in sectional schism in 1845. While early Methodist leaders opposed slavery, they also repressed abolitionism when threatened with proslavery backlash. However, democratic governance practices undermined Methodist agency authority. Abolitionists took advantage of these openings and pressed their agenda even in the face of resistance from leaders and Southern coreligionists. Despite the consecrated status of church Bishops, neither abolitionists nor their proslavery opponents appeared to fear that challenging Bishops or leaving the church altogether would impact on their spiritual station, demonstrating leaders' low religious authority.

Denominational repression of abolitionism and its failure

Early Methodist leaders opposed slavery. When the church was founded in 1784, slaveholding was banned among members and clergy, but this policy was indefinitely postponed following immediate Southern backlash (Methodist Episcopal

Church, hereafter MEC, 1785; Asbury 1821). To protect church unity, leaders delegated slavery policy to regional administrative bodies, allowing abolitionists to oppose slavery in their own local contexts without aggravating Southerners (Bascom 1845: 10). Leaders retained antislavery language in church documents distributed in the North but removed it from literature distributed in the South (MEC 1855: 62–63).

After several failed attempts to preserve both antislavery policies and Church unity, leaders grew frustrated with the conflict generated by abolitionists and began a campaign of repression. In 1836, the national General Conference passed a resolution censuring two abolitionist clergy, in which the body declared itself to be "decidedly opposed to modern abolitionism," and unwilling to "interfere in the civil and political relations between master and slave as it exists in the slave-holding states of this union" (MEC 1855: 445–47). Bishops issued a pastoral address urging Methodists not to agitate the subject of slavery (Curts 1900: 116–17). When these strong words did not stop abolitionism, Bishops blocked regional administrative bodies from passing abolitionist resolutions and made silence about slavery a condition for the retention of official church positions (Mathews 1965: 153–54). Despite the church's antislavery history, Methodist leaders repressed abolitionist mobilization when the threat of schism loomed.

Each wave of repressive action provoked new protest, however. In 1841, some abolitionists left to form a "come-outer" sect, the Wesleyan Methodist Church (Mathews 1965: 230–1). The size of the exodus shocked the leaders of the General Conference. Those who remained behind grew bolder, and several Northern conferences formally expressed opposition to slavery for the first time (Matlack 1881: 151–2). Church leaders began to see that Southern backlash was not the only threat—Northern dissatisfaction with the Church's tacit support for slavery was beginning to rival the Southern threat (Matlack 1881: 139–41). At the same time, Southerners grew increasingly radical: they had historically demanded only that slavery be tolerated by the church, but by the 1840s began to demand that church leaders express moral *approval* of slavery.

The tension erupted in 1844. Before the meeting of the General Conference, word began to circulate that Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia had, since assuming his post as bishop, inherited enslaved people (West 1855: 82). No previous Methodist Bishop had been a slaveholder, and because their duty required traveling to and serving churches throughout the nation, the General Conference feared that Andrew's slaveholding might mobilize antislavery moderates who had, at least until now, accepted the church's strategic toleration of slavery (West 1855: 165). On the other hand, Southern churchmen saw Andrew's retention as a crucial indicator of church support for their cause and were determined to secede if Andrew was removed from his post. When the Conference met in 1844, leaders felt that schism was sure to result regardless of their actions. Faced with this irreconcilable conflict, leaders finally conceded to abolitionists. They resolved that Andrew's holding of slaves while a Bishop of the Church would "greatly embarrass the exercise of his office … if not in some places entirely prevent it," and determined that it was "inexpedient" for him to maintain his post without emancipating those he held in bondage (West 1855: 231–2). Unwilling to manumit the people he enslaved, Andrew resigned, triggering the secession of the whole Southern portion of the Church and the formation the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Methodist authority and repressive capacity

Why did Methodist leaders finally concede to abolitionists after decades of repression? Several weak points in the church authority structure enabled abolitionists to mobilize despite leaders' repressive efforts, leading to growth in their strength and numbers until the abolitionist threat rivaled proslavery threat and movement–countermovement conflict became insurmountable. The first major factor that limited leaders' repressive capacity was the religious authority of Methodist bishops, which was subordinate to the rational-legal authority of the General Conference. Bishops were elected by General Conference delegates prior to their consecration and remained liable throughout their terms to discipline by the Conference (Gorrie 1856). At the same time, the open and democratic structure of the central legislative body weakened agency authority. As part of its normal business, the Conference entertained petitions from delegates, which gave abolitionists opportunities to air grievances. The institutional response to petitions was to create a committee, and norms dictated that such committees included representatives of various opposing positions (see, for example, MEC 1855: 170, 205, 1836: 442). Further, no leaders, including Bishops, could control the conference agenda against the will of the delegates in attendance. These two features—the limited scope of Bishops' religious authority and democratic agency norms—reduced church repressive capacity, and actions viewed as authoritarian could be (and were) challenged in a body that reflected diverse regional positions on slavery.

Failed neutrality among the Baptists

The Baptists, a congregationally organized evangelical denomination that also grew rapidly during the antebellum period, experienced schism over slavery following intense conflict between abolitionists, their proslavery opponents, and a body of reluctant leaders. Given their congregational polity structure, no officers within the church possessed the authority to enact binding national policies on slavery. However, the warring factions within the church appealed to the domestic and foreign missionary organizations for adjudication, pressing leaders into a policy-making position. While leaders denounced authority over church policy and formally expressed their neutrality, they also attempted to prevent conflict by repressing abolition. Yet, as was true of the Methodists, democratic political institutions created opportunities for mobilization while the lack of concentrated authority undermined repression, leading to sustained movement–countermovement conflict that culminated in Southern secession from the church in 1844.

Denominational repression of abolitionism and its failure

In 1840, abolitionist Baptists who felt the Church was not doing enough to oppose slavery held the first American Baptist Antislavery Convention. During the convention, they wrote a letter asking their Southern coreligionists to repent from slaveholding. A backlash immediately ensued, and Southern clergy demanded that leaders of the central missionary agencies reprimand abolitionists (Groser 1840: 525, Savannah River Baptist Association, in Foss 1850: 49–51). In response, the General Convention of the Baptist Church denied Elon Galusha, an author of

the letter, reappointment to his board position. He was replaced by a South Carolina slaveholding preacher named Richard Fuller, with whom Galusha had earlier engaged in a print debate over slavery (American Baptist Foreign Mission Society 1841: 16). The Convention went further and, in response to abolitionists' requests that slaveholders be barred from church membership, passed a resolution rejecting the demands and declaring that such "unscriptural tests" were inappropriate and divisive (Cone 1841, in Foss 1850: 75–79). Abolitionists continued to agitate for an end to church toleration of slavery but faced ongoing resistance from the national church agencies. In 1844, the domestic missionary agency declared that discussion of slavery was "a most unnecessary agitation of topics with which the society has no concern" (American Baptist Home Mission Society 1844: 4–6).

Though church leaders opposed abolitionism, they failed to reduce mobilization. In 1843 a group of abolitionists withdrew to form an antislavery "come-outer sect," the American Baptist Free Mission Society (McKivigan 1984: 99–101). The departure of the come-outers marked an increase in the threat posed by abolitionism and triggered increased countermobilization from the proslavery faction of the church (Foss 1850: 87–9). In 1844, two different Southern Baptist Associations separately demanded that the church missionary agencies hire slaveholders to prove that they did not discriminate, declaring their intention to depart from the church if their demands were not satisfied (Hill 1844; Hartwell 1845). Once church leaders saw that schism was inevitable, they reversed their anti-abolition course and refused proslavery demands, leading Southerners to depart and form their own religious agencies (Hill 1844).

Baptist authority and repressive capacity

Like the Methodists, Baptists eventually conceded to abolitionists after their repressive efforts failed to curtail movement–countermovement conflict. Among the Baptists, this change occurred even more quickly. Because of the Baptist Church's congregational polity structure, the national community was held together by cooperative agencies like the domestic and foreign missionary societies, which had no formal authority over church policies (Gorrie 1856). Since these organizations were focal points of denominational consciousness, their leaders were pushed into a policy-making role (McKivigan 1984). When leaders did intervene by repressing abolition, however, they lacked the authority to quell dissent with their verdicts. Leaders' censure of abolitionists carried no spiritual or legal weight; their only coercive power was to restrict access to positions or privileges within the missionary bodies themselves. Though these positions were socially important and were a critical point of contestation during the slavery conflict, leaders still had limited coercive leverage. With leaders unable to stem the tide of abolitionist mobilization, proslavery backlash escalated, and the conflict eventually led to schism.

Strong, centralized authority in the Protestant Episcopal Church

Unlike the Baptists and the Methodists, the PEC remained united throughout the antebellum period and faced comparatively little conflict. While prevailing accounts of Episcopalian responses to slavery paint a portrait of indifference, antislavery activism did take place among Episcopalians. However, repression prevented the

development of a disruptive, collective challenge to slavery. To demonstrate this, I first show that the impetus for mobilization was in fact present, and then I show that all observed instances of antislavery activism were siloed and stymied in an effort aimed at preventing Southern backlash.

Episcopalian challenges to slavery

One instance in which Episcopalians expressed opposition to slavery occurred in 1851, after a bishop, Henry Hopkins, wrote a Biblical defense of slavery. Though Hopkins expressed personal disapproval of slavery, he argued that it could not be condemned on purely religious grounds because the Bible sanctioned it. His statement met considerable resistance, and his co-religionists challenged him in numerous published replies (Levy 1967; Potter 1863). Bishop Alonzo Potter of Pennsylvania, along with the clergy of his diocese, wrote a letter of protest with more than one hundred signatories in which he declared Hopkins' support for slavery "unworthy of any servant of Jesus Christ." At least ten other Episcopalian authors published their own challenges to Hopkins' defense. One described Hopkins' essay as an "attempt to press Holy Scripture into the cause of a system of tyranny almost unequalled in the history of our race, and founded on violence and robbery" (Drisler 1863: 1). But where this type of controversy might have led Baptists or Methodists to petition their national agencies for intervention, no record exists of such requests to the General Convention of the PEC. Nor did the General Convention establish any committees to address concerns over Hopkins' remarks or the proper course of the church regarding slavery. Unlike leaders in the high conflict churches, Episcopal leaders did not allow conflict over slavery to interfere with the operations of the church's governing body.

Abolitionist repression in the PEC

In 1834, anti-abolition mobs stormed into the church of Rev. Peter Williams, a Black abolitionist Episcopal priest. The mob destroyed most of the church property, carrying the pews into the street and setting them on fire (Townsend 2005: 488–89). When Rev. Williams informed his white Bishop, Benjamin Onderdonk, of the events, Onderdonk's response was to instruct Williams to step down from his post at the American Anti-Slavery Society and to publish his resignation in order to show the public that "on whichsoever side right may be, [Williams' congregation] will be found on the Christian side of meekness, order, and self-sacrifice to common good, and the peace of the community" (Onderdonk 1834).

In another incident, a young Black seminarian, Isaiah DeGrasse, was asked to withdraw from seminary shortly after enrolling in 1836, on the grounds that the admission of a Black student, though technically permissible, would antagonize the seminary's Southern supporters (Jay 1843: 14–17). De Grasse was offered private instruction as an alternative. Three years later, Black abolitionist Alexander Crummell also attempted to join the seminary. Upon finding his application rejected, he petitioned the Board of Trustees to reconsider his case. While the board's statutes indicated that admission appeals should be settled by the faculty

of the seminary, in this case the board formed its own committee to respond to Crummell's petition. The committee denied him admission. Bishop Doane, who had initially been asked to head the committee, removed himself prior to its decision. Following the committee's verdict, Doane protested the decision and asked that his reasons for doing so be documented. His request for documentation was denied by the board (Trustees 1839, in Birney 1885: 46–47).

Personal correspondence between church leaders and the students to whom they denied entrance to the seminary indicate that the admission of Black students was considered "inexpedient" due to the risk of antagonizing Southern supporters (DeGrasse in Jay 1843: 14–17, Crummell 1839: 4). Official church records, on the other hand, do not mention race or allude to debate over the ethics of racial exclusion (Birney 1885: 46–47). Indeed, leadership during the Crummell case directly forbade the entering of Bishop Doane's protest into the church records. These cases point to the churches' investment in preventing conflict between abolitionists and proslavery—and their effectiveness at doing so. They also point to a key strategy leaders used: silencing. More broadly, these instances expose a lack of democratic procedures and leadership accountability, which in other denominations created opportunities for abolitionists to challenge both church toleration of slavery and leaders' repressive efforts. It is important to note that suppression of conflict did not reflect an indifference to worldly matters more broadly, because church repressive efforts were unidirectional: leaders did not, for example, sanction Bishop Henry Hopkins for provoking debate with his proslavery writing, but rather stifled abolition while conceding to Southern racism.

Episcopalian authority and repressive capacity

As I have already documented, Baptist and Methodists leaders made great efforts to silence and punish abolitionists, yet they could not prevent their mobilization. Episcopalians, however, appear to have been quite successful at denying abolitionists the requisite opportunities to air grievances and gain support. What explains the success of Episcopalian repression? While the PEC formally adhered to the same basic polity structure as the Methodist Church, religious and agency authority were both more concentrated in the hands of top PEC leaders. Bishops owed more of their legitimacy to their consecration and to apostolic succession than to their positions as elected officials, giving them high levels of religious authority (Gorrie 1856). Bishops in the PEC also had greater legislative autonomy than Methodist bishops: they constituted an "upper house" that oversaw and approved all decisions of the "lower house," i.e., the General Convention. In contrast, the authority of Methodist Bishops was subordinate to their General Conference, and their control over the agendas of conferences was formally limited and subject to challenge (e.g., Methodist Episcopal Church 1855: 138–51).

Finally, the proceedings of the PEC General Convention were not structured to broaden participation or encourage collective deliberation, as they had been in the Methodist Church. According to Strange (2019: 774), "unlike Evangelical denominations that placed greater stock in a sense of democracy amongst their clergy, Episcopalians stressed the importance of apostolic succession and a clear hierarchy

within the Church." The political institutions that characterized Methodist conferencing, such as petitioning on contentious issues, were absent in the PEC. There is no record of any petitions related to slavery in the minutes of the General Convention at any point from its founding to the outbreak of the civil war (PEC, 1785–1861). With strong agency and religious authority, the Episcopal Church possessed high repressive capacity and used it to suppress abolitionist mobilization and thereby avoid the intensification of conflict between abolitionists and proslavery that precipitated schism.

Tradition and limited bureaucracy among the Disciples of Christ

The Disciples of Christ (also known as the Christian Churches), like the PEC, avoided conflict and schism over slavery despite having members and clergy with strong opposing views on the subject. While the church was congregationally organized, like the Baptist Church, informal authority was far more concentrated, and leaders managed to prevent significant abolitionist mobilization. The traditional leadership of the church's living founder created strong religious authority, while the lack of extensive bureaucratic development during the study period left unchecked administrative power in the hands of a few individuals.

Disciples battle slavery

Several events indicate the presence of antislavery feeling among the Disciples of Christ and suggest the possibility that a formidable abolition movement could have emerged in a favorable context. Antislavery preachers challenged leaders' decision to hire a slaveholder as the church's first international missionary in 1849 (Moore 1909: 455). Later, when the church attempted to silence a vocal abolitionist, Pardee Butler, his supporters rallied behind him. Butler and his supporters eventually left to form a "come-outer" sect, just as abolitionists had done in the Methodist and Baptist Churches (Vandegrift 1945: 27–29). Disciples also made their antislavery views known by writing to Church magazines, where they expressed dissatisfaction with the Church's continued toleration of slavery and announced their intentions to leave the Church because of its failure to act against slavery (e.g., Campbell 1845: 313, 506). None of these events led to sustained movement–countermovement conflict, however, because church leaders retained high levels of religious and agency authority.

Abolitionist repression in the Christian Churches

The attempted silencing of Pardee Butler in 1858 was one of the clearest examples of repression by Disciples' leaders. A missionary on the American frontier, Butler spread both the gospel and his antislavery views. When Butler was nominated as a candidate for church missionary service, the missionary agency's corresponding secretary, Isaac Errett, demanded Butler's silence as a condition for his funding. Errett feared "a breach between the North and South," might be brought on by Butler's agitation:

"It must, therefore, be distinctly understood, that if we embark on a missionary enterprise in Kansas, this question of slavery and anti-slavery must be ignored; and

our missionaries must not be ensnared into such utterances as the [abolitionist-leaning] 'Northwestern Christian Magazine' can publish to the world, to add fuel to the flame already burning in our churches on this question." (Errett as quoted in Lamar 1893: 215).

Butler refused the conditions presented to him and was denied a post as a domestic missionary. Just a few years earlier, however, the church had appointed slaveholder J. T. Barclay as its first missionary abroad. Abolitionists had written to Errett in protest of Barclay's hiring, but Errett possessed the authority to quietly dismiss their concerns without any further process and sent Barclay to represent the church abroad. Viewed together, these episodes show that slaveholding was not a bar to missionary work among Disciples, but abolitionist activity was—and that a single individual was able to determine church policy on these topics (Moore 1909: 455).

Another important site of repression in the church was the magazine of Alexander Campbell. As editor of the *Millennial Harbinger*, he asserted that the Disciples of Christ were opposed to abolitionism. Wherever abolitionists wrote to his influential magazine to express their concerns over slavery and the Church's toleration, Campbell rebuked and ridiculed them (e.g., Campbell 1851: 49–51). In 1845, he began publishing a series of his own essays titled "Our Position to American Slavery," where he expressed the view that slavery was biblically permissible and that no Christian had the right to consider it sinful or evil, or to exclude or otherwise discipline their fellow Christians for keeping and purchasing slaves (Campbell 1845a-e).

Authority and repressive capacity among the disciples

The structural preconditions for the concentration of authority among the Disciples of Christ differed from those among the Episcopalians and demonstrate an alternate form of repressive capacity. Alexander Campbell helped found the Disciples movement, along with his father Thomas Campbell and their colleague Barton Stone. After the deaths of Stone and Thomas Campbell, Alexander Campbell remained the sole living representative of the church's originating principles. His influence is demonstrated in his continued election to the church's highest post: though the office of the president of the church missionary society was open to new officials every year, Campbell was re-elected annually from the organization's inception in 1849 until his death in 1866 (American Christian Missionary Society 1909: 30). Through the two major denominational periodicals he edited during his lifetime, Campbell wielded this outsized influence, to the detriment of abolitionists. The presence of this singular authoritative leader amounted to levels of *religious* authority that far exceeded those in the Baptist and Methodist Churches and rivaled that of Episcopal Bishops.

At the same time, the skeletal bureaucracy of the church centralized power in few hands; no provisions were made for transparency, communal deliberation, or the expression of dissent by clergy or members. The Disciples had only become a unified religious body in the 1830s and did not centralize missionary activity until 1849. The American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS) was its only centralized church body and democratic procedures like those that existed among Baptists had not yet developed during the antebellum period. For example, when abolitionists brought

their concerns to the attention of the ACMS, they did not petition the Society during its meeting or publish in the denominational magazine; instead, they wrote personal letters to the corresponding secretary of the society. Likewise, ACMS leaders gave their answers in private correspondence. Because of these less formal decision-making procedures, leaders were not accountable to other clergy and abolitionists had no public venue for challenging policies. This meant that individual leaders of the missionary society had high levels of agency authority, despite the decentralized structure of the church. Consequently, repressive capacity was far greater than one might expect, and effective suppression of abolitionism prevented denominational slavery conflict.

The role of repressive capacity

The Baptists and Methodists both experienced major schisms between Northern and Southern portions of the churches. Authority in both churches was diffusely concentrated. The episcopal office of the Methodist church was subordinate to the control of the General Conference, which undermined religious authority. At the same time, the democratic decision-making procedures of the General Conference weakened leaders' agency authority. Together, the lack of both agency and religious authority amounted to low repressive capacity for the Methodists, and when leaders tried to punish abolitionists or assert control over church agencies, abolitionists successfully challenged their overreach—and, in doing so, gained the support of moderates. Failed repression led to increased abolitionist mobilization and spurred on further conflict between abolitionists and proslavery, eventually leading to schism.

Baptist leaders censured abolitionist agitators and denied them church offices, but they also had low repressive capacity. The national church was held together by participation in cooperative missionary societies whose leaders had no religious authority. The scope of leaders' agency authority was limited to the specific organizations they headed, and even within those organizations, their authority was constrained by democratic norms. Accordingly, the repressive actions of Baptist leaders failed to curb abolitionist mobilization and prevent schism.

The Episcopalians and Disciples of Christ, in contrast, successfully repressed abolitionist mobilization and prevented organizational schism. The high concentration of religious and agency authority embodied in the Protestant Episcopal bishops allowed them to quietly manage the handling of all issues related to slavery and race, preventing abolitionists from gaining support or provoking proslavery backlash. Leaders among the Disciples of Christ also managed to silence abolitionists and prevent their mobilization, but by somewhat different means. Religious authority was highly concentrated in the traditional leadership of the church's surviving founder, while the church's minimal bureaucracy meant that agency authority was concentrated in the hands of the missionary society's corresponding secretary. These two officials exerted significant authority over the church's slavery policy and used it to deny abolitionists opportunities to grow in strength and provoke proslavery backlash. In the absence of open movement–countermovement, these denominations avoided schism.

Reduced abolitionist mobilization only followed repressive actions in churches with highly concentrated religious and agency authority. In churches with diffusely distributed authority, repressive tactics did not reduce abolitionist mobilization. Abolitionists in high conflict churches were fired, denied opportunities for promotion, and publicly censured. Leaders in these churches expressed moral disapproval of abolitionism and refuted its religious logic. Yet abolitionists continued to press their agenda year after year, leading to escalating movement–countermovement conflict and eventual schism.

Regional culture: An alternative explanation?

Thus far, I have said little about the possible impact of geography, but American slavery had an obvious spatial dimension during the antebellum period. Since the churches differed in the levels of support they drew from the South, it is reasonable to imagine that regional culture may have shaped denominational propensities toward schism. There are two plausible—and conflicting—hypotheses about how geography might impact the risk of schism. The first and most straightforward prediction is that if more congregations are located in the South, then there should be less interest in abolition, slavery should go unchallenged, and there should be no basis for schism. The opposite prediction is also conceivable, however: a greater proportion of congregations in the South could mean intense proslavery backlash in response to the slightest expression of abolitionist sympathies, leading to high levels of conflict in majority-Southern churches, even if support for abolition was miniscule.

Neither geographic hypothesis is supported by the evidence. The first hypothesis, that majority-Southern churches should tolerate slavery and be spared from schism, can be quickly rejected in light of the data presented earlier in Table 1. Table 1 shows antebellum religious denominations by their number of congregations in slaveholding states in 1850. If indeed greater presence in the South led to unchallenged toleration of slavery, Baptists and Methodists, which had greater proportions of their congregations in the South, would have avoided schism. The Disciples and Episcopalians, who had greater proportions of their congregations in the North, should have experienced rupture. Since neither prediction is correct, this hypothesis fails.

The second hypothesis remains plausible in light of the numerical data in Table 1, but is not supported by the case studies. Excluding the Presbyterian Church (for reasons discussed earlier), both remaining schism cases had a small majority of their congregations in the South, while non-schism cases had larger proportions of their congregations in the North. If drawing a greater share of adherents from the South was the cause of schism because, as per the second hypothesis, it led to stronger denominational opposition to abolitionism, then there should be other signs that anti-abolitionism was stronger in these churches–but case studies indicate the opposite. While I have shown that the Methodist and Baptist churches did indeed oppose and repress abolitionism, they were certainly not *more* closed to abolition than the Episcopalians and Disciples, the majority-Northern churches that successfully repressed abolitionism. Baptist and Methodist leaders, despite extensive efforts to repress, displayed a greater willingness than Episcopalian or Disciples' leaders to hear the perspectives of abolitionists and to engage with the movement. Leaders

among the Disciples and Episcopalians, on the other hand, repressed abolitionists with unparalleled efficacy despite drawing more of their support from Northern states. Thus, my conclusion remains: opportunities for abolitionist mobilization created by low repressive capacity are a better explanation for the occurrence of denominational schism than the geographic distribution of church congregations.

Conclusions

In this article, I have shown that nineteenth century slavery-related church schisms were the result of failed attempts at social movement repression. Support for abolition among church leaders was extremely limited because of the threat that proslavery backlash posed to church organizational interests. Despite widespread opposition to the movement among denominational leaders, however, abolitionists found opportunities to mobilize in churches with low concentrations of authority because low repressive capacity made it possible for abolitionists to challenge or circumvent repression. When abolitionists managed to mobilize even in the face of denominational opposition, their actions triggered ongoing movement–countermovement conflict that eventually led to schism.

Though repressive capacity is often considered an essential component of the political opportunity structure, it remains undertheorized and existing conceptions that focus on the strength and power of military or police are difficult to extend to soft repression by non-state targets (Brockett 1991; McAdam 1996). Walker et al. (2008) noted that non-state targets have a lower capacity for social movement repression than do states because they lack recourse to violence. However, I have shown that non-violent repression can indeed curb mobilization, contingent upon sufficient repressive capacity. I argue that repressive capacity is determined not by the particular tactics available to the target, as suggested by Walker et al., but rather by the target's ability to discipline or punish challengers in any way, including through the use of "soft" repression (Ferree 2005; Earl 2003, 2011). In other words, what makes repressive tactics able to reduce mobilization is not the violence they entail but rather the authority behind them. This authority can be traditional, charismatic, or rational-legal, but to reduce mobilization, it must be highly concentrated, and the movement must emerge within the scope of leaders' authority, as when challengers are employees of an organization or citizens of a state.

More broadly, I have shown that church responses to abolitionism were not fundamentally moral or theological, but rather reflected a dynamic exchange between a social movement and its target. In this struggle, churches behaved as Luders (2010) would have predicted, opposing social movement activity based on strategic calculations of concession and disruption costs. Though some might expect churches to champion moral progress, and others might expect churches to be little more than cultural instruments of the powerful, I argue that the demands of organizational survival exerted their own pressures that explain church behavior (Selznick 1949; Michels 2009). Religious leaders, regardless of historical positions toward slavery or church theological orientations, acted to preserve their organizations in the face of movement–countermovement conflict.

In suggesting theology as the determinant of religious support for slavery or abolition, Patterson (1982), King and Haveman (2008), and Budros (2011) each exemplified the idealist orientation in Weber's sociology of religion. This position extends far beyond research on religion and slavery and is found more broadly in scholarship on religion and politics. Whether the topic is contemporary Evangelical opposition to abortion or the rise of the Islamic State, there is a strong tendency among scholars to attribute religious behavior to theology. My findings suggest that this is sometimes misguided, and that researchers interested in explaining behaviors that appear to be religiously motivated should not neglect the social and political struggles that take place within religious communities, or the role of authority structures in determining the outcomes of such struggles. By looking beyond theology and toward the internal politics of religious communities, scholars can avoid the false presumption of a unified religious perspective, examine the processes by which some views become dominant within religious communities, and ground their examination of theological ideas in the actual social processes by which individuals adopt their views of the world.

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