

A Reply to My Critics  
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How fortunate to be the beneficiary of a critique that is even-handed and generous, and which raises questions that prompt this author to elaborate thoughts that were either densely formulated in “Religion is Not a Preference” or left out entirely.

The essay that has prompted the Reply from Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen posed a question for both empirical and normative thinkers, namely, are the terms adopted within Political Science today to mark designate religious—“preference,” choice,” “value” and “identity”—adequate to the phenomenon at hand? Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen have not sought to address the normative dimension of the question. Empirical political scientists, however, may proceed as they have, they argue, using these terms cautiously, with the full understanding that there are means to confirm or disconfirm their usefulness.

There are a number of topics raised in the Reply, which circle around two not-unrelated questions: on the one hand, the essay presupposes an “individualistic, Protestantized, apolitical conception of religion” (?); on the other hand, the empirical *behavior* that political scientists observe provides ample evidence that these terms are appropriate, since religious persons and communities actually *do* use them. I will consider each of these questions in turn, since on the answer to them hangs one or another interpretation of the evidence Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen adduce.

It was not without considerable forethought that the subject of my essay is religious *experience*. While I could have considered religious *doctrine*, religious *practices*, or even religious *institutions*, the choice of the term religious experience seemed warranted for two reasons. First, conceptual and methodological inroads to the study of “social” phenomenon have not displaced methodological individualism in the discipline of Political Science. The individual remains the preeminent unit of analysis, and it is the individual, not the community, for whom experience is an attribute. Sociologists may recoil at methodological individualism, but a

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comprehensive alternative to it has yet to be devised. The concern with religious *experience* accords with the disciplinary norm that the preeminent unit of analysis is the individual. It may well be a Protestant prejudice to do so, but to raise an objection to it is at once to raise an objection to the discipline as a whole, since the prejudice it shares with Protestantism is its attentiveness to the individual. Is the individual the *only* relevant phenomenon? Of course not. I sought to respond to that point in a dense paragraph that distinguished religious experience from its communal after-effects, as it were.

Let us not confuse generative formation, the mystery of the mimetic “reproduction of the same,” however, with the religious experience that can often coincide with it. The liturgical habits of religious practice may be the occasion for religious experience, or may seek to elicit such experience, but such practices are not, themselves, the religious experience to which they point. If religion corresponds to “identity,” it is only as a sort of *mimetic trace*, which alerts us to a domain of liturgical practices passed down generation to generation, the concern of which is to point to an ineffable mystery that cannot be cordoned off and contained by such practices. (Mitchell 2007, 359)

Religious communities are, on this view, the outworkings of a religious experience that one or more persons had, which then were made sense of—and here I agree with Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen—through the mediation of others. William James put the matter more eloquently, in his Gifford Lectures:

In one sense at least personal religion will prove itself more fundamental than either theology or ecclesiasticism. Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed

their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mohamet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case;—so personal religion should still seem the primordial thing, even to those who continue to esteem it incomplete (James 1990, 35)

This passage not only corroborates the first reason for making the individual the unit of analysis, but also introduces the second reason, namely, that *novel* developments in religion only emerge as a consequence of individual experience. This is not to say that a well-established religious community cannot subsequently change course through deliberations about the meaning of this or that primordial experience that its current members did not have, or that the significance of a novel religious experience cannot be downplayed, ignored or twisted by the authoritative mediators of those religious communities. It is to say, however, that however modified, the primary unit of consideration must be individual religious experience. From such individual religious experience—which no luminary in the canon of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim tradition has ever conveyed in terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” or “identity”—religious fervor within existing religious communities has been enkindled; from them, in fact, new religions and new sects have emerged. That is why I claimed that the difficulty empirical political scientists face when they study religion is the “problem of uncomprehended amplitude” (Mitchell 2007, 360). By not recognizing that religious experience, by definition, is a *disruption* of everyday experience, and that it therefore cannot be treated as a preference of the sort that everyday life presents, they are likely to under-estimate the power of religious experience to reconfigure everyday life. Such events happen infrequently on the historical time line, but they are the ones that reconfigure the world.

I respond to the first underlying objection of Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen, then, by

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noting that methodological individualism has yet to be overturned in political science, and that a focus on individual religious experience allows us, at least in principle, to recognize that it disrupts everyday experience and, so, is not scalar—something that treating it as a “preference,” etc., does not allow us to see. Understood in the way I am proposing, political scientists will not *systematically* misrepresent the religious irruption they witness (should they witness it at all), or the possible novel outworkings that emerge from it. In “Religion is Not a Preference” I mentioned that Martin Luther King had a “dream” not a “preference” (Mitchell 2007, 360); I could have mentioned Martin Luther and John Calvin as well, whose religious writings evince more than “preferences” and whose influence extended to the whole of Europe, and beyond.

The second objection, which I indicated was not unrelated to the first, is that the however historically accurate I might be about the intellectual lineaments of the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity,” the bald fact remains that *today* many religious practitioners comprehend religion in just those terms. On behaviorist grounds, then, my argument is unhelpful. Since Protestant prejudices have been mentioned, it seems only fitting here to note that methodological individualism and behaviorism are the *both* outworkings of Protestantism—the former because the locus of agency is the self; the latter because it seeks to bypass the question of the essence of a thing and attend only to what it shows forth. This idea, it should be noted, was a central theological point within Calvinism: God is known not in Himself, but in what He shows forth (Calvin 1960, 60-61). And as it is with God, so, too, it is with His Creation. Little wonder, then, that Roman Catholic universities to this day have never become bastions for behaviorism; as an outworking of Protestantism, behaviorism has thrived in the once-Protestant Universities of the East and in the Big Ten Universities of the Protestant Midwest. To lay matters bare, I readily admit to adopting the “Protestant” prejudice that favors methodological individualism—but not to the Protestant prejudice that favors behaviorism, for

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reasons I hope to make clear below.

Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen are not wrong to point out that the behavior of many of those who respond to questionnaires presented to them by political scientists suggests that they are quite comfortable using the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” to describe how they understand themselves and how they act. Doesn’t this suggest that those terms *are* indeed adequate to phenomenon at hand? Let us not stop with there. Indeed, a perusal of publications from the popular press, the academic press, and even the publications from Seminaries around the country will show that these terms have been insinuated into religious vernacular seemingly seamlessly, as if to confirm that they are quite consonant with, say, the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. On a more personal note, having taught undergraduates in the Persian Gulf for the last two years, I can add that this sort of thing is going on in the Muslim world as well, if the numerous cable television programs that emanate from different parts of the Middle East are any indicator. Islam, too, it seems, has become a “value” or an “identity”—but not, interestingly enough, a “preference” or a “choice,” a point to which I will return shortly.

What is to be made of this appropriation of terms that historically have been anathema to religion, to the point where many Americans feel quite comfortable using them? Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen suggest that “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” are plastic enough such that they can come to mean something quite different than their original meaning. If that is true, then it doesn’t matter that they do not systematically appear in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.

What if the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” are elastic rather than plastic, however? On this view, these concepts do not stand alone, but are part of a larger ideational “conformation,” to borrow from organic chemistry, of the sort that a comprehensive

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philosophical and historical examination should be able to reveal. So understood, it would not at all be surprising that one of these terms can stand in as a proxy for religious experience, but in the long run be rejected, because it is foreign to it, in much the same way as viral proteins attach themselves to a binding site of a complex organic molecule because they “fit” even if they do not belong there—and then kill the organism.

Something like that appears to be happening with religion, not only in America, but around the globe. The liberal language of “preference” and “choice,” on the one hand, and the Continental language of “value” and “identity” are being insinuated, more or less, into Synagogues, Churches and Mosques around the globe, leading one to wonder whether what is being witnessed there is a religious service or a social science lesson.

This easy conflation and appropriation of terms is the sort of thing that Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen could easily point to in order to confirm that behavioral evidence suggests that I am raising an issue that need not concern empirical political scientists. Notwithstanding this evidence, I think it ought to concern empirical political scientists. I do not disagree with the evidence Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen, but rather with its significance. In footnote 16 of the essay I wrote:

After the Presidential election of 2004, well-meaning Democrats, who recognized that their Party had not taken religion seriously enough, claimed that they, too, had “values.” This strategy of subsuming religion under the term “values” is unlikely to convince a large body of the American electorate who feel no need to translate religious experience in this way. Of the ten Presidential elections from 1968 to the 2004, the Democratic Party has won only three: one by Carter; two by Clinton. Both men were comfortable talking about religion on its own terms. It is

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not much of a stretch to predict that unless the Democratic Party puts forth a candidate in 2008 who is capable to doing as Carter and Clinton did, they will not regain the White House (Mitchell 2007, 360).

For a significant number of Americans, a sermon that was long on values-talk, however, and short on the tropes that the Bible presents—“man’s exposure to a world of death and of destitution, of the insufficiency of his own resources, of short-lived glories, of the hope that hovers over sorrow, and of God’s enveloping love” (Mitchell 2007, 352)—would quickly raise the suspicion that something other than biblical religion was being preached. If Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen are right that “value” is a plastic term, then the Democrats have every reason to believe that if they talk about “values” in the 2008 Presidential election, they have every chance of winning. If “values” is an elastic term, which is currently being stretched to stand in for a domain of experience that, finally, outstrips the term itself, then a “values” campaign to garner the religious vote in 2008 is a very bad idea.

I mentioned the appearance of the terms “value” and “identity” on cable television in the Middle East in reference to Islam, but not “preference” and “choice.” If “identity” is a term that is plastic and malleable, then there is no harm done in invoking it to describe what it means to be Muslim, since linguistic terms are fungible. If, however, “identity” carries with it the notion of resistance to an all-subsuming logic (Mitchell, 2007, 358), be it capitalism, westernization, liberalism, etc., then Islam ceases to be a religion (which involves having an unhardened heart towards God, and not the self-satisfaction of the sort that “identity” invites) and becomes a strategy of resistance. I say nothing controversial by confirming that this understanding of Islam is indeed a troubling development in that region of the globe, helped in no small part, I submit, by European colonial connections to the Middle East which brought the luminaries who founded

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what today goes under the sloppy term, “Islamic Fundamentalism,” to Europe, where they were steeped in the Continental language of “value” and “identity.”

Further indication that the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” are not mere cognates for religious experience is suggested by the absence of the invocation of “preference” and “choice” to describe Islam today. Monotheism—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—entails a contradiction, for the human mind at least, involving God’s providence and human freedom. Christianity never chose one or the other (see Augustine 1984, 195). Islam chose God’s providence over human freedom. Little wonder, then, that “preference” and “choice” are seldom invoked in the Muslim world, and are in the United States. They *are* used here because they are rough but ultimately inadequate proxies for that notion of bounded freedom that Christianity entails (see Tocqueville 1967, 45-46). They cannot, however, be stretched far enough to fit Islam, which is why little attempt is being made to make them stand in for the religious experience that the Koran purports to convey.

The reader will recall that I am still addressing the second main point that Professors Wald, Wilcox and Jelen make, namely, that the empirical *behavior* that political scientists observe provides ample evidence that the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” are adequate descriptors for things religious. I have conceded that these terms are being used, but am unconvinced that such usage need not concern political scientists. Behavioralism concerns itself with the fact *that* an event is reported as it is, and goes no further. Therein lays the problem. A number of important questions are cordoned off by understanding to the world in that way: when did these terms enter religious discourse; are they the mark of a robust religious community, or a sign of its decay; are they used by Liberal Protestants, Evangelicals, Post-Vatican II Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Reformed Jews, Cosmopolitan Muslims intent on showing the rest of the world that Islam is akin to Judaism and Christianity in important ways; are they invoked by Al Qaeda,

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Hezbollah and other groups of their ilk? —And that is just the beginning. Such questions cannot be posed, however, unless some effort is first made to comprehend the nature of religious experience as it is re-confirmed by the Revelational sources we have at our disposal. From there it is indeed interesting to ask how the terms, “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity”—whose roots, I argued in “Religion is Not A Preference,” are *anti-religious*—have insinuated themselves in religious communities in different ways. If we are to understand religious experience we must, in other words, understand it first from the *inside*, and not as it is registered in the *outward* demarcations of “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” that today confirm what has always been true, namely, that precisely because “the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all” (Cicero 1972, 69), religious persons and religious communities are tempted to accommodate themselves to the familiar idioms that are the currency of the broader society in which they dwell. As Finke and Stark (2005) have shown, however, doing so all but assures that in time a religion or a denomination betrays its austere religious roots and drives its congregants to religious communities who want not elastic proxies for religious experience, but rather the thing itself.

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