

# RELIGION IS NOT A PREFERENCE

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## Abstract

The resurgence of religion around the globe poses a challenge for both empirical and normative social scientists. For the former, the question is whether the terms at their disposal are adequate to comprehend religious self-understanding and, therefore, human motivation and conduct. For the latter, the question is whether those terms confuse or clarify the way in which religion may be brought into public dialogue without violating the tenets of pluralism or toleration. How, then, do social scientists of both persuasions currently understand religion? I begin by distinguishing religious experience from other sorts of experience, with a view to demonstrating, first, that the two preeminent terms adopted by social scientists today—“preference” and “choice”—cannot comprehend religious experience. To do this, I provide a brief exposition of what I call the “fable of liberalism,” in order to explain why the terms “preference” and “choice” have achieved the currency that they have, and what problems their invocation was intended to address. Second, I consider two other terms social scientists often invoke—“value” and “identity”—and suggest that these terms also are inadequate for understanding religious experience. The first set of terms arises in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, out of the Anglo-American

tradition; the second set of terms arises in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, out of the German tradition. None of these terms are able to comprehend religious experience, which antedates these sets of terms by centuries. I end by suggesting, first, that empirical social scientists would do well to reconsider whether terms that arose during specific historical moments in order to circumvent or to supersede religious experience can help them understand human motivation, let alone predict human conduct, whenever or wherever religion is involved; and, second, that the attempt by normative social scientists to bring religion into the public sphere by treating it in terms of “preference,” “choice,” “value,” or “identity” distorts religious experience, and cannot succeed as a strategy for reintroducing religion into public dialogue, since religion is not what they wish to render it in terms of.



# Religion is Not a Preference

December 2006

There are many questions in philosophy to which no satisfactory answer has yet to be given. But the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all (Cicero 1972, 69).

A generation ago, in the midst of the Cold War and before the Iranian Revolution, it would have seemed unnecessary to raise serious questions about the way social scientists understand religion. Human motivation and conduct were largely understood in liberal terms, under the guise of “preference” and “choice.” And while feminism and concerns about race were clearly making their way into the mainstream debates and challenging the liberal paradigm, the terms “value” and “identity” that have become so prevalent today to comprehend liberalism’s failure on these two important fronts had scarcely begun to be invoked. Religion seemed then to be an anachronism, soon to be marginalized if not swept away by “modernization.” Today, while the internecine battle within liberal regimes continues about how to extend the franchise to include women, African-Americans and other minorities, a startling new development has come to our attention, namely, the resurgence of religion around the globe, both within certain liberal regimes and without.

The effort to comprehend that resurgence has, understandably, drawn on the resources immediately available to the social science community. And for that reason it

is not surprising that the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value,” and “identity” are suddenly doing double-duty—at once comprehending phenomenon that have long been the purview of social scientists, while at the same time being extended to comprehend the modality of religious experience that now here and there spills over into politics. What follows is an attempt to illuminate the intellectual foundations of those terms, why they came into existence, and how they obscure rather than illuminate religious experience. I do this with a view to suggesting that the social sciences are in a new phase of their development, and that they are called, by virtue of certain empirical developments—namely the religious resurgence in the world today—to begin to think afresh about the terms through which they understand human motivation and conduct. To accomplish this, we would do well to begin by comprehending religious experience in its self-stated idioms, which are logically and chronologically prior to the act of translation that rendering it as “preference,” “choice,” “value,” and “identity” entail. The “darkest and most difficult [question] of all,” as Cicero called it, the question of religion, is now decisively upon us, and new thinking will be necessary to comprehend it.

### **Religious Experience**

I will not here attempt to generalize from biblical experience to generic religious experience. My purview will be that domain of territory in which Western Christianity came to prevail and within which Liberal and Continental thought subsequently gained currency. While I will henceforth use the term “religious experience,” I intend it in the narrower sense that I have just described. Moreover, my usage is not intended to be denominational. The centrality of what I describe here may vary from denomination to

denomination, but the modes of experience themselves are recognized by all of them. And by recognized, I mean that they are confirmed in the words of the Holy Books that articulate them: the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Biblical religion, so circumscribed, is not a preference. It is not a choice. It is not a value. It is, above all, not an identity. The oldest of these terms emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the youngest, arguably, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Christianity is 2000 years old, Judaism perhaps 3500. Let these be the frame of reference for this discussion here. The terms “preference,” “choice,” “value,” and “identity,” if they are used at all in the New Testament or in the Hebrew Bible, are used incidentally, never systematically. These terms, moreover, have no bearing on what the New Testament and Hebrew Bible record, or seek to convey. Rapture, suffering, awe, obedience, faith, love—these pervade the religious books of Christianity and Judaism. They are terms concerned with the majesty of God, the wonder of creation, the errancy of man,<sup>1</sup> the mystery of covenant, and the inscrutability of divine imputation. They tell us of 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. Here man ascends beyond his reach and, when cast down to the dust, he is lifted up to regions his unaided imagination cannot begin to grasp. In the dust man is humbled; lifted up to the heights by God he is exalted. What do “preference,” “choice,” “value,” or “identity” have to do with humility or exaltation?

In order to distinguish the domain of experience to which “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity” pertain, on the one hand, from the religious experience of humility and exaltation, on the other hand, let us begin by considering what humility and

exaltation have in common, so that the larger genus of experience that is religious experience can be identified.

The religious experience of humility is always *post facto*. By this I mean that humility invariably has as its reference an antecedent condition in which man is self-satisfied and content with his plans. So self-satisfied and content, his gaze is not fixed on the dust from whence he comes and to which he goes, nor toward heaven, but rather toward the horizon that his upright gaze sets before his eyes, to the “world” in which he makes his way. Humility always has as its reference this “world” in which man daily lives, the life where neither death nor eternal life is his immediate concern.

There can be no humility without an interruption of this “world” whose measure is established by man’s own upright gaze. Humility corresponds to the disruption of this measure, and involves not simply the recognition that man has mismeasured his true situation—that he may stumble to the dust at any moment, his gaze averted from its self-satisfied horizon—it also involves remorse and repentance as well. I say remorse and repentance and not simply recognition, because recognition does not animate the soul. It leaves the soul *unmoved*. Remorse and repentance, on the other hand, involve a visceral shirking, occasioned by an indictment of fault, and a “turn” (*periagoge*), respectively. Both redirect the soul away from the “world” with which it was previously satisfied. Humility has as its reference a “world” that has disappeared before man’s eyes, and to which he can never fully return. Humility involves stumbling to the dust, and losing one’s way.

Where humility involves being cast down, exaltation involves being lifted up higher than the upright gaze of man naturally allows. Humility bows man down below

himself to the dust; exaltation carries man outside himself. Unlike humility, exaltation involves *ecstasis*. Here the soul hovers and watches from a lofty vantage point that is unburdened by the cares of the “world” or by the collapse of that “world” into the dust. Exaltation, unlike humility, has no sting, for in being lifted up, man is withdrawn from the modalities of past, present, and future that are coincident with the horizon that his upright gate sets before his eyes; and also from the collapse of these modalities that attends humility. Exaltation draws man toward the Timeless; humility confronts man with the abrupt end of all time. Where humility entails the undoing of the “world” in which man daily lives, exaltation entails communion with the God who created such a world *ex nihilo*.

What the religious experiences of humility and exaltation have in common, you will have discerned, is that in them man does not remain unmoved, as he does while he attends to the “world,” to the horizon that his upright gate sets before his eyes. By this I do not mean that in the “world” man is not constantly “on the go.” Rather, that being constantly “on the go” supposes a degree of stability of the “world” such that man may execute his plans, or make adjustments by which he may catch himself before he stumbles should something go wrong. Being “on the go” presupposes a stable “world” that only a man who is unmoved may have. In the experience of humility and exaltation, in contradistinction, man is no longer “on the go.” His “world” is interrupted because he himself is moved—stumbling into the dust or transported toward the heavens. Religious experience always involves a movement of the soul, and an interruption of “the world.”

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Let us pause here and note the simple threefold division that has been elaborated: in humility, man is *moved* and stumbles into the dust; in self-satisfaction and contentment, man is *unmoved* and attends to “the world” that his upright gate sets before his eyes; in exaltation, man is *moved* and drawn into communion with God.

<b>Experience of Humility</b>	<b>Stumbling to the Dust</b>	<b>Man is Moved</b>
Experience of Self-Satisfaction	Attending to “the World”	Man is Unmoved
<b>Experience of Exaltation</b>	<b>Communion with God</b>	<b>Man is Moved</b>

Thus far, of course, I have merely indicated that religious experience involves a movement of the soul in two distinct ways. The table above locates the two modalities of religious experience within a three-fold schema, and situates the experience of self-satisfaction between these two modalities. Here, in the middle, man neither looks down to the dust, nor up to the heavens, but rather off to the horizon, towards his “world.” So now let us consider the domain of human experience that pertains to this “world.” More specifically, let us consider the situation of man as he gazes off to the horizon that his upright gate reveals.

A biological or anthropological interpretation of this phenomenon might be that when man achieves an upright gaze, the terror of the horizon that comes at him prompts him to invent myths.<sup>2</sup> True though that might be either for the beginnings of civilization, or at all times for children at a certain stage of their development, there comes a time in the life of a civilization or of a child when the horizon ceases to terrify. Perhaps it is at this point that the threefold scheme I have delineated emerges. When the primordial experience of the terror of the horizon that comes at man yields to the self-satisfaction that must presume a “world,” the *movement* of man can occur only next to that domain of

experience in which man is now secure. Religion supplants myth when “a world” rather than terror appears to man’s upright gaze. The coincident experiences of humility and exaltation suppose already this third possibility of self-satisfaction. Religion, unlike myth, supposes a “world.”

With this in mind, let us turn to the terms “preference,” “choice,” “value” and “identity.” These are actually two distinct families of terms, each of which warrants attention. The first family emerges largely out of 18<sup>th</sup> century English thought; the second largely out of 19<sup>th</sup> century Continental thought.

The terms “preference” and “choice”—the first family—suppose a “world” occupied by a plurality of objects whose measure is scalar. Invocation of these terms supposes that all desires may be brought into proximity and set side by side, as if they could be weighed and compared in the marketplace using a common currency of exchange. In such a marketplace, now this, now that, desire appears; and man must establish what he wants from among the plurality of scalable alternatives before him. In this marketplace through which he strolls man *has* preferences and *makes* choices.

“Having” and “making” are only possible, of course, when man’s “world” is secure. —And the marketplace is surely such a place of security. The primitive man who is still terrorized by the horizon, and who resorts to myth, “has” and “makes” nothing, since on mythical accounts all that is possessed or made derives its ontological status in relation to the archetypal events that occurred in the Beginning. By myth, man is saved from the terror of the unnamed horizon by acts of recapitulation. ‘As it was done in the Beginning, so it is done now,’ and so on (Eliade 1959, 45). Only the man who has a “world” in which he is not terrorized *has* and *makes*. Hobbes made a similar point

when he noted that in the state of nature, where terror reigns, there can be no ‘commodious living’ (Hobbes 1994, 76).

Religious experience is of a different order than *having* “preferences” and *making* “choices.” Religious experience cannot be understood as a “preference,” because the God who stands before man is not among the plurality of scalar objects among which he prefers this over that. Religious experience pertains not to the extant plurality in the created “world,” but rather to the Creator who is the source of that plurality. Where the chasm between two domains is unbridgeable, there can be no scale to which “preference” pertains.

Neither can religious experience be understood as a “choice,” since in religious experience man does not choose God, but rather the other way around: *God chooses man*, by moving him either toward humility or toward exaltation. The Hebrew Bible is an account of a Chosen People, not of a people that chooses. Therein lays the dignity and agony of man. True, the matter of man’s “free choice” suggests a more subtle account than I have given; but even here, such “choice” achieves the coherence that it does in light of the mystery of God’s creation of a creature capable of turning away from Him. That is, “free choice” supposes the possibility of a defection from that which always-already binds man, as creature, to God. In religious experience, “choice” presupposes this boundedness that man does not choose.

### **The “Fable of Liberalism” and the Problem of Ecstasis**

In due course I will turn to the second family of terms, “value” and “identity.” First, however, let us consider the following question: against the backdrop of what set of

problems does contemporary liberal thought come to comprehend religious experience under the rubric of “preference” and “choice”? This is clearly the dominant set of terms that we use. How has this come about? Why, more broadly, is it that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the range of human experience has been increasingly collapsed into the monological language of “preference” and “choice”? To what end was this done; what danger did the invocation of such terms avert? Are we now incapable of understanding religious experience because of our uncritical acceptance of the categories of thought we have inherited?

In order to sketch out a rough answer to these questions, it will be necessary to briefly rehearse what I will here call “the fable of liberalism.”<sup>3</sup> I mean no disrespect by this term. Rather, I have in mind something akin to what Socrates suggests in the *Republic*, when he observes that to begin educating the young, we must “tell tales and recount fables” (Plato 1985, 72). These tales and fables, powerful though they are, are best understood as a sort of heuristic, which are not superceded by the facts, but rather serve to organize them. The fable of liberalism does this as well. This fable had its origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was brought to completion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Tocqueville. Recent renditions of it can be found in the work of Hirschman (1977) and Manent (1998). It is not, strictly speaking, an account of the facts, but rather as a profession, a resume, a disclosure of, and coordinated reflection upon, a type of soul that emerges into the light of day, and seeks to understand the world in which it has suddenly found itself. What does it tell us?

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The liberal genealogy, so the tale goes, is marked by two distinct epochs. The first corresponds to a past that is either rapidly receding from view, or irretrievably lost, and which is known to us through the recorded deeds of men who evinced grandeur of soul that can no longer be fancied, let alone produced. Here loyalty, honor, virtue, manliness, and above all great longings, held sway in the souls of a few. Here, too, pettiness, destitution, and squalor overwhelmed the lives of the unnamed many. In this first epoch, society was a relatively well-understood hierarchy, even if not a well-ordered one, purportedly corresponding to nature herself, in which the bonds of affection were prescribed by the rank into which one was born. Authority was vested in men and not in abstract principles, and formality and protocol were, for the nobility (and not only for them) the “decent drapery of life,” as Burke (2001, 239) called it. Landed property was the basis of wealth, the consequence of which was the curious elevation of both prudential knowledge and military valor: the former, because the leisure afforded to a landed class alone could give rise to it; the latter, because there was no overarching power to secure the boundaries of landed property itself. The privileged knowledge of the aristocracy, and its incessant warfare, constituted the defining features of the epoch.

Where the warrant for the first epoch was the legacy of the past, the warrant for the second epoch is the promise of the future, a future not under the guardianship of a few great men, but rather the possession of nations, or even of humanity as a whole. The aristocrat was a steward who vouchsafed the mortal patterns inherited from his fathers; the human being of the present moment, however, labors alone—or perhaps guided by the beneficent hand of an invisible God—not in order to imitate the fathers but rather to innovate.<sup>4</sup>

Let us add that nature herself offers no guide to human beings in this second epoch, for she, too, arose out of a series of contingent events that could have been otherwise. Gone, therefore, is nature's familiarity and humanity's easy confidence about a natural order into which it has been placed, and to which its faculties correspond. Here loyalty can mean little, for it depends on organic union, which is illusory; honor can mean little, for it depends on rank, which affronts modern sensitivities; virtue can mean little, for it depends on character, which takes too much time and effort to develop; manliness can mean little, for it depends on the prospect of violence, which has been eliminated; great longing can mean little, for it depends on an emptiness of soul, the awareness of which has been buried by a glut of goods or made the object of therapy.

Where nature offers no comprehensive guide, humanity is thrown back upon its own resources, upon its "reason," which is now understood, not in its unity as communion with God, but in its dirempted, disenchanting, aspects: subjectively; as self-interest—in our terms, "preference" and "choice"—; objectively, as science. The multiple and nuanced possibilities of human excellence that emerged in the first, enchanted, epoch have here receded and been replaced by the monolith of reason—not incidentally, at the very moment that multiple social ranks collapse and give way to the univocal aspiration for "well-being," which is the very hallmark of social equality.<sup>5</sup>

Yet this forlorn situation of humanity without aristocratic bearings is not without recompense. Reason so delimited attains its proper object. In its subjective, self-interested aspect, the self-referentiality of reason invites the development of reflective judgment, private conscience and, above all, individual responsibility. In its objective, scientific aspect, it invites the development of a generalized method of inquiry for the

purpose of understanding and transforming the natural world, so that physical well being may be secured for humanity as a whole.

Not only does reason attain its proper object in this second epoch, but also, in finally finding it, humanity need no longer indulge and exhaust itself endlessly in the passions of war. The calmer and tamer disposition of reason that is both cause and consequence of commerce triumphs as humanity is finally able to make a *productive* purchase on the natural world:

Commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and everywhere there is commerce, there are gentle mores (Montesquieu 1989, 338).

The height to which humanity may ascend through reason is lower than the height to which the aristocratic man may ascend through glory, but in its availability and advantage to all constitutes reason's superiority. Glory is the purview of a few aristocratic men; reason is the purview of humanity as a whole. On the battlefields, a few great men emerge; in the market place, humanity as a whole benefits. The taming of man, and the advent of universal commerce for humanity, is to be the achievement of the second epoch. Here, moneymaking supplants the aristocratic longing for glory. A world exhausted by war chooses a tamer course:

We have finally reached the age of commerce, an age that must necessarily replace that of war, as the age of war was bound to precede it. . . . The former is all savage impulse, the latter civilized calculation. It is clear that the more the

commercial tendency prevails, the weaker must the  
tendency to war become (Constant 1988, 53).

The taming of humanity that occurs in this second epoch is a consequence of more than just the victory of reason over glory, however. The collapse of multiple social ranks carries with it the burden and promise of human relations without predicates. The chasm between nations, social ranks, generations, and between men and women is, if not bridged, then at least bridgeable in principle, since differences between them have no durable foundation in nature.<sup>6</sup> Where the first epoch is characterized by rank and ‘pathos of distance,’ the second epoch is characterized by social equality and “fellow feeling.”<sup>7</sup> Here, each human being is close enough to every other so that all suffering is noticed, and mutual empathy is possible. Reason and commerce may tame the passion for glory and render life orderly; but it is empathy that finally softens humanity. In the second epoch concern and solicitude become possible.

The accomplishments and future potentialities of the second epoch are not grand, but they are decent. Commerce cannot produce great men, but it can yield well being for all. Sympathy and concern are no doubt pale affections in comparison to loyalty of the sort that rank inspires; but with loyalty comes cruelty as well, and the advantage of the paler affections is shown by this very conjunction.

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You will have noticed, in this fable that underwrites liberalism, that its great accomplishment is the substitution of “rationality” for honor and for the associated passions of war—the latter of which, like religious experience, involve *ecstasis*. In war,

man is “caught up” in the moment and drawn outside himself. In the pitch of battle, there are waves of advance and retreat—think of Homer’s *Iliad*—, elation that “the gods” have offered their blessings, or spine-tingling fear that they will be unremittingly cruel. In war there are no “preferences,” no “choices,” only the play of forces in which one participates and watches.<sup>8</sup> In war, man has no “world.”

Hobbes, who I have recently mentioned, is emblematic of the great liberal accomplishment of substituting ‘commodious living’ for the uncertainties—the unworldliness—of war in the state of nature. But he is also emblematic insofar as he intends to excise all modalities of *ecstasis*, those pertaining to war as well as those pertaining to religion, as if their outworks are the same by virtue of having the same *experiential* common denominator. The fable of liberalism, as we have seen, chronicles the movement from aristocracy into democracy, with its attendant transmutation of honor into rationality, war into commerce, and *ecstasis* into the modality of experience where man is *unmoved*. Liberalism demands the language of “preference” and “choice,” for these vouchsafe civilization from the lurking possibility of the *ecstasis* of war. This is its great accomplishment.

But in doing so, in protecting rational man from the vicissitudes of honor and war, the terminology of “preference” and “choice” rules out that other mode of *ecstasis*, namely religion. Liberal thought looks over its shoulder at a past that was bloodied by war; yet the terminology it invokes as a fortification against war’s reappearance does double duty. The world tamed by “preference” and “choice” has no room for either war or for religion. Such a world knows nothing of *ecstasis*, in its several guises. Liberal thought saves man from honor and the passions of war, but the language of “preference”

and “choice” that accomplishes this simultaneously renders religious experience incomprehensible. To this day, liberal thought has been caught in this bind within which it is both saved from honor and the passions of war and rendered oblivious to the religious experience out of which the political sensibilities of the modern Anglo-American world in part emerged. “Preference” and “choice” are the monochromatic locutions upon which we rely to depict religious modalities of experience which these terms themselves were deliberately invoked by the progenitors of the “fable of liberalism” to rule out. They are the lens through which religious experience cannot be seen.

### **The Continental Configuration: “Value” and “Identity”**

The fable of liberalism is a creation of the Anglo-American world, assisted in no small part by a formidable intellectual tradition of French anglophiles in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The second family of terms—“value” and “identity”—by which religious experience is increasingly comprehended is largely of German origin. Moreover, this second family of terms emerges as a reaction against meta-narratives—“fables”—of the sort offered, say, by Hegel, whose own sympathy is, in its own inimitable way, liberal as well. It is, however, not simply his liberal inclinations that are the source of the reaction against him, but rather his manner of thinking through the way in which God should be understood in the modern age. But more on Hegel in due course.

The term, “value,” is often used synonymously with “preference.” Nietzsche well recognized, however, that the term “value” should not be confused with the term,

“preference.” A perusal of *The Genealogy of Morals* gives ample evidence that it was exactly the English model of utility, of “preference,” that Nietzsche sought to oppose:

It was out of this *pathos of distance* that [noble souls] first seized the right to create values and to coin names for values: what had they to do with utility! The viewpoint of utility is as remote and inappropriate as it possibly could be in the face of such a burning eruption of the highest rank-ordering, rank-defining value judgments: for here feeling has attained the antithesis of that low degree of warmth which any calculating prudence, and calculus of utility, presupposes—and not just once, not for an exceptional hour, but for good (Nietzsche 1967, 26).

“Preference” supposes a careful weighing and measuring among alternatives; “value” predates such alternatives, historically, and is superior to them, normatively. Only a certain sort of man wants the “happiness” that the moral vocabulary of “preference” presupposes: namely, an Englishman. The rest want creativity, passion, meaning, depth, self-sacrifice—in short, the sort of thing of which the calculus of “preference” knows nothing.

So expressed, it would seem that “value” may, in fact, comprehend the religious experience of *ecstasis*, described above. The problem with which Nietzsche is wrestling, however, is precisely the impossibility of having religious experience now that man had learned to be honest with himself:

Unconditional honest atheism (and it is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore *not* the antithesis of [the will to truth], as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences—it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in the belief in God* (Nietzsche 1967, 160).

Absent the religious experience of *ecstasis*—I leave the religious experience of humility out of this account entirely, since Nietzsche found it to be evidence of human pathology—man has available to him the possibility of creating “values” *ex nihilo*, as it were. These alone attest to man’s greatness and dignity. The sooner man looks forward to creating values, rather than backward, with melancholy, to a God whose only trace is a moral code from which man continues to suffer,<sup>9</sup> the sooner will man regain his health.

The “values” that man creates are their own testament, need no further justification, and authorize themselves without reason. There is, therefore, no calculus that mediates between them. One simply opts, without transcendental reason, among them. There can be no “preference” here either, for “preference” presumes a calculus by which *this* can be compared to *that*. Having a “preference” for a “value” conflates two entirely different conceptual schemes, neither of which comprehends religious experience.

In light of what has just been said, however, it is not too difficult to understand why religious experience has been more readily comprehended under the category of

“value” than under the category of “preference.” “Value” involves an orientation; it is comprehensive and constitutive, and pertains to man’s search for meaning in a world that seems oblivious to that quest. As such, it has little in common with the always provisional calculus of “preference.” “Preference” answers to what is lower in man; “value” answers to what is higher. And since religion is among the higher things, “value” seems to be a term of equivalence with religious experience.

But here, again, it would be a mistake to conflate the two. Nietzsche knew this; so, too, did Weber, who followed him. In a world in which God is now absent, there remains that dignified possibility—difficult to achieve, to be sure—of having a coherent orientation towards a “value.”<sup>10</sup>

The fruit of the tree of knowledge, which is distasteful to the complacent, but which is, nonetheless, inescapable, consists in the insight that every single important activity and ultimately life as a whole, if it is not to be permitted to run on as an event in nature but instead be consciously guided, is a series of ultimate decisions through which the soul—as in Plato—chooses its own fate, that is, the meaning of its activity and existence” (Weber 1949, 18).

Religious experience cannot be a “value” because the term “value” supposes already the impossibility of religious experience, of humility or exaltation of the sort in which man is *moved*, toward and by God. “Value” has as its correlative, “meaning.” Religious experience has as its correlative, God. The chasm between “value” and religious experience cannot be bridged by supposing the commensurability of “meaning” and

religious experience. To speak of “religious values” is to speak incoherently, since a “value” is something that man has as his own. But religious experience reveals that man, truly, has nothing of his own, that God is the Author of all things, and that man’s relationship to the created world is that of steward, not owner. “Value” is affirmative with respect to man; religious experience is deferential with respect to God.

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Let us turn now to the term “identity,” in order to understand why it, too, cannot be properly affiliated or equated with religious experience. The concern with “identity” can be traced to Hegel’s claim that in the course of the march of world history, Absolute Knowledge subsumes all “difference.”<sup>11</sup> Religiously expressed, this is a claim that God uses the oppositions between good and evil in order to redeem a fallen world,<sup>12</sup> at the end of history. “Difference” and historical existence are coterminous here, though with the important caveat that a promise of a final unification is held out as the substance of faith.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy, however, has no place for either God’s providence or for faith, since these religious notions are merely the “picture-thinking” version of what unmediated thought can itself know.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, for Hegel, the insight about the relationship between historically inevitable difference and final unification that Christianity proffers is retained, though purportedly on the higher ground of pure thought.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that “identity politics” is the ongoing response of the Hegelian Left to the notion that difference is subsumed by the Absolute. “Don’t be a chump” may well be the highest ethical imperative of Rational Choice

Theorists; “let the different remain different” is the call of those who champion “Identity Politics.” Difference can *never* be subsumed; identity remains intransigently self-same.

We should not be confused about what this intransigence means for the prospect of mediation across the boundary that separates differing identities. “Identity politics” supposes not only difference, which pluralism and the language of “preference” acknowledge, but also difference of a sort that is not, finally, mediable through the scalar calculus of “preference.” Said otherwise, *identity is not a preference*. Preferences, because scalar, can be quantified; “identity” must be qualified.

By this I do not mean that “identity” can be comprehended by a constellation of empirical attributes which, taken in sum and properly configured, serve as a ready indicator of *this* or *that* “identity.” Quantitative research in the social sciences has certainly sought to proceed in this manner, but this method seems rather blind to what identity involves, since those who claim to be members of an identity group do not purport to speak authoritatively on the basis of a constellation of empirical attributes, but rather on the basis of a constitutive experience that outsiders cannot know. The scalar preferences acknowledged by pluralism are, in principle, capable of being deliberated over by any and all citizens. Identities, on the other hand, are confessional, monological. About identity, citizens cannot deliberate, since the locus of its authority is not the faculty of reason. Identities are their own authority and provide their own authorization. They are intransigently self-same, fortified against the possibility of genuine outreach, and often bequeathed by the accidents of birth.<sup>15</sup>

If we concede that “identity” is not a “preference,” and that religious experience, too, is not a “preference,” might we conclude, by syllogism, that religion pertains to

“identity”? Insofar as religion is passed down generation to generation, for example, and is constitutive of character, can we not say that religion has the always-already-there attribute of “identity”?

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.

That there is this correspondence at all gives some credence to the equation of “identity” with religious experience, but the manner in which “identity” and religious experience diverge is warrant enough to avoid conflating them entirely. The idea of “identity,” as we have noted, emerges in response to Hegel’s quasi-theological claim that all difference is subsumed in the unfolding of history. “Identity” is self-same, and is not absorbed or superseded. To invoke an earlier idea, identity provides a “world” (and an immensely stable one at that) on the basis of which “resistance” to an extant order is both possible and expected. Yet I have suggested that religious experience is precisely not a “world,” that it is a modality in which man is cast to the dust in humility or elevated above any and all “worlds,” in exaltation. When man is *moved* through religious experience, the self-same of “identity” fails to comprehend the state of affairs in which

man finds himself. Insofar as man has religious experience, he does not have an “identity.”

### **The Contemporary Impasse**

I have suggested here that the two families of terms by which religious experience is comprehended today—“preference” and “choice,” on the one hand; and “value” and “identity,” on the other hand—are inadequate. Each arises out of a particular tradition, seeks to solve a certain set of problems, and in the course of doing so comprehends religious experience *as if* it is something other than what it is: namely, religious experience.

Absent an external shock, which may now be upon us, there is little reason to suspect that this confusion would have been rethought within the social sciences. Misrepresentation, as Nietzsche pointed out (1967, 37), is a privilege of ascendancy. The charm of the fable of liberalism has always been its gospel Good News that the atavisms of the past are soon to be superseded (Fukuyama 1991). And as the fate of the fable of liberalism went, so, too, would have gone the language of “preference” and “choice.” A generation ago these terms were subtle markers for the claim that religion would recede as liberalism came to prevail. Today, in the face of religious resurgence around the globe, these terms are also being invoked to comprehend the religious experience that they were originally intended to rule out. This emergent meaning, however, does not so much correct the fable of liberalism as reconfigure the meaning of its most eminent terms so that liberalism’s ascendancy may remain unchallenged.

To this let us add that the multiple aftershocks associated with the Continental attempt to render God in terms amenable to reason during the Enlightenment continue to reverberate. Nietzsche and Hegel still haunt us. A generation ago, the terms “value” and “identity” began to be invoked, often by the Left, as a way of extending the political franchise to groups who would have been invisible within the liberal configuration of “preference” and “choice.” Today, while that project continues, the terms “value” and “identity” are also being retooled so as to comprehend religious experience as well—as if the ‘subjective turn’ made by Hegel and completed by Nietzsche (Löwith, 1964), which the Left understood to have manifest political implications, can now be brought into service to understand what I have here argued cannot be understood to be ‘subjective’ at all, namely religious experience.

Let us leave aside, however, the paradox associated with both of these families of terms—namely, that “preference” and “choice,” on the one hand, and “value” and “identity,” on the other, were invoked in the first place to displace or to reconceptualize religious experience, while today they are invoked to name it. The question to be posed is whether these terms are adequate, empirically, in light of religion’s resurgence around the globe; and, normatively, if our wish is to accommodate this religious resurgence politically, consistent with the requirements of pluralism and toleration?

The empirical question can be posed in a straightforward way: if religious experience involves what I have called a “movement of the soul” that is able to animate human conduct in ways that mere “preferences” or “choices” are not, then we will face what could be called a ‘problem of uncomprehended amplitude.’ That is, our understanding of the phenomenon at hand is liable to seriously underestimate the

amplitude of what is likely to transpire. The complete failure of the social scientists to anticipate, let alone predict, the Iranian Revolution, for example, may have been due, in no small part, to the terminology that was used. In American politics, it is difficult to imagine Martin Luther King standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial saying, “I have a *preference* today.” He did not have a “preference,” he had a *dream*—one that only made sense in light of a religious hope of deliverance from bondage that moved souls in powerful ways.<sup>16</sup> In both cases, rendering what happened in terms of preference or choice would have led to a serious underestimation of what actually transpired. Empirical social scientists may no longer aspire to predictive power, but that does not absolve them from the need to have terms at their disposal so that they are not completely surprised—as they will be again and again unless matters change—when religion animates human conduct.

The normative question is no less straightforward: is it possible for well-meaning academics, public intellectuals, and even candidates for public office to bring religion into public discourse under the guise of pluralism—either the old pluralism of the Anglo-American tradition based on “preference” and “choice,” or the new pluralism now being constructed, largely on the Left,<sup>17</sup> based on “value” and “identity”? So configured, they intimate, religious experience is rendered as one possible “preference,” “choice,” “value,” or “identity” among many—and is therefore worthy of inclusion within a kaleidoscopic and ever-expanding public discourse that liberalism both allows and invites.

Here, another sort of problem emerges. Whereas ‘the problem of uncomprehended amplitude,’ as I have called it, bedevils the empirical social scientist, the normative social scientist is confronted by something else: ‘the problem of impatient

appropriation.’ Empirical social scientists, I have suggested, have been content to use terminology that cannot comprehend the religious phenomenon that they increasingly witness. Normative social scientists, on the other hand, have been impatient to bring religion back into public discourse and, so, have appropriated the terms of the old and the new pluralism—“preference” and “choice,” on the one hand; and “value” and “identity,” on the other—because they have accepted the premise that without doing so, religious experience could not meet the tests of pluralism and of toleration.

However proper that premise might be on pure philosophical grounds, the bald historical fact about the United States is that every major upheaval in this nation’s history—from the civil rights movement in the 1960’s, to the Progressive era at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the Social Gospel movement of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the abolitionists of the Civil War period, to the Revolutionary war (“No King but King Jesus” was one of its slogans)—has come out of places of worship in America or been nourished in them. The American community and the communities of America have all been formed, in no small part, by its churches and synagogues. The great transformations of America are called “movements” for a good reason: citizens and non-citizens alike have been *moved*, religiously, towards a new course of conduct.

There is every reason to suspect, moreover, that during the next great crisis political and religious leaders will do as they always have done in America, namely, invoke religion on its own terms for the purpose of comprehending that crisis, irrespective of what the largely secular academic community declares to be out of bounds in political discourse.

This ongoing fact of American political culture is not, however, what I am concerned with here. During the interludes between great crises religion stands dutifully in the background,<sup>18</sup> as it should, so that the practical business of American politics can proceed. Yet in the Academy today normative social scientists who witness religious resurgence in the United States and around the globe, and who acknowledge that Rawls' "veil of ignorance"<sup>19</sup> rules religious belief in any palpable sense out of liberal political discourse, are tempted to introduce religion into that discourse by appropriating terms that are allowed—again, "preference," "choice," "value" and "identity." It would be prudent not to succumb to that temptation.

Tocqueville, that sage of the modern age who saw his beloved Roman Catholic Church falter during the transition from aristocracy to the democracy because it had aligned itself to powers and idioms that were alien to it, issued a warning nearly two centuries ago that we would do well to heed today.

So long as religion derives its strength from sentiments, instincts, and passions, which are reborn in like fashion in all periods of history, it can brave the assaults of time, or at least can only be destroyed by another religion. But when a religion chooses to rely on the interests of the world, it becomes almost as fragile as all earthly powers. Alone, it may hope for immortality; linked to ephemeral powers, it follows their fortunes and often falls together with the passions of the day sustaining them (1967, 298).

Religious experience is older than the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century terms that still captivate us here at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These terms—“preference,” “choice,” “value,” and “identity”—were generated to understand specific problems. As new problems arise, they must be seen as the historically contingent terms that they are, so that more adequate terms can be developed. The lesson, to paraphrase Tocqueville, is that “[religion] does not need [the support of such transient terms] in order to live, and in serving them it may die” (1967, 298). On this reading, appropriating the terms “preference,” a “choice,” a “value,” or an “identity” for the purpose of bringing religion back into public discourse will not save religion, but rather hasten its demise.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I shall use this term throughout, since it accords with biblical usage. The term “human being” is not quite the equivalent, since by its invocation one kind of *being* may be distinguished from another. In the Book of Genesis something like this occurs, to be sure; but the more proper delineation pertains to creatures, not beings. Adam—the biblical correspondent of what we today awkwardly called “human beings”—is the last of God’s *creations*. Adam is, therefore, a creature, made (not begotten) *ex nihilo*. Adam is not a “being” of one sort or another. Man is a creature, with all that that entails about the need to understand what is due to his Creator.

<sup>2</sup> Blumenberg (1985, 5) suggests that the achievement of upright posture so extended the horizon from which reality can “can come at one” that it became necessary for the imagination to arrest the “existential anxiety” (1985, 6) that ensued when the human

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being nakedly faced the unoccupied, unnamed, horizon. Myth fills that horizon and arrests anxiety.

<sup>3</sup> This account of the fable of liberalism can be found in Joshua Mitchell, *Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Conclusion, pp. 167-75. There, I contrast Plato's *Republic* with the fable of liberalism, with a view to the question of whether the modern/anti-modern debate that lurks in the fable of liberalism can be comprehended by the typological distinction between timocracy and oligarchy in Bk. VIII of Plato's *Republic*, and to whether "philosophy," understood in the manner Plato propounds, is able to supersede the terms of that debate.

<sup>4</sup> Smith's (1976, 69) rejection of the guild and apprenticeship system of production, in favor of an ever changing system involving the division of labor, accords with this transformation from imitation to innovation. Marx's response to Smith is that bourgeois civilization reproduces itself in its "own image" (1978a, 477). Bourgeois civilization destroys one form of imitation, only to introduce another.

<sup>5</sup> Rawls' project, which begins from the vantage point of a "veil of ignorance" (1971, 12), and out of which citizens without a socially constituted history emerge, is the resume of a social order without rank.

<sup>6</sup> See Hobbes (1994, 75): "For Prudence is but experience, which equal time equally bestows on all men in those things they equally apply themselves unto." See also Smith (1976, 18): "The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of

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different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labor.”

<sup>7</sup> See Smith (1982, 8-9): “By our imagination we place ourselves in [another man’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were his body, and become in some measure the same person with him. . . . His agonies, when they are brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us. . . . [T]his is the source of our fellow-feeling for the misery of others.”

<sup>8</sup> See Gray (1970, 29-39).

<sup>9</sup> See Strauss (1989, 240): “Nietzsche’s criticism can be reduced to one proposition: modern man has been trying to preserve Biblical morality while abandoning Biblical faith. That is impossible.”

<sup>10</sup> Consider, in this regard, Weber’s attempt to specify, in his two essays, “Politics as a Vocation,” and “Science as a Vocation,” what he took to be the only existentially honest response to the absence of God in the modern world, namely, a coherent life commitment to one or another “value sphere” (1946, 77-128; 129-56).

<sup>11</sup> See Hegel (1977, 492): “This Becoming [in history] presents a slow moving succession of Spirits, a gallery of images, each of which, endowed with all the riches of Spirit, moves thus slowly because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of substance. . . . In the immediacy of [any] new existence the Spirit has to start afresh to bring itself to maturity as if, for it, all that preceded were lost and it had learned nothing from the experience of earlier Spirits. But recollection, the inwardizing, of that experience, *has preserved it and is the inner, and in fact the higher form of the*

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*substance*” (emphasis added). For Hegel, all residual historical antecedents are incorporated into the current incarnation of Spirit. Nothing is lost or left incomplete.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Augustine, *City of God* (1950, 7:213-14): “God would never have created a single angel—not even a single man—whose future wickedness He foresaw, unless, at the same time, He knew of the good which could come of this evil. It was as though He meant the harmony of history, like the beauty of a poem, *to be enriched by antithetical elements*” (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> See Augustine (1950, 6:17-18): “[The future security of the City of God is that] goal for which we patiently hope ‘until justice be turned into judgment,’ but which, one day, is to be the reward of excellence in a final victory and a perfect peace. The task, I realize, is a high and a hard one, but God will help [us].”

<sup>14</sup> See Hegel (1977, 463): “*This form of picture-thinking* constitutes the specific mode in which Spirit, in [the religious] community, becomes aware of itself. This form is not yet Spirit’s self-consciousness that has advanced to its Notion qua Notion: the mediation is still incomplete. . . . The *content* is the true content, but all its movements, when placed in the medium of picture-thinking, have the character of being uncomprehended” (emphasis in original).

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche’s rejection of the idea that the faculty of reason hovers without connection over the body—a thought that suffuses all of his writing—led him at times to offer the rather chilling formulation that the vitality of a people is predicated on their blood line (1967, 28-31).

<sup>16</sup> I thank Jean Bethke Elshtain for this reference.

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<sup>17</sup> 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 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.

<sup>18</sup> This was what Tocqueville advocated (1967, 290-94).

<sup>19</sup> See note #4, above.

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