

Religious Preferences and Social Science: A Second Look

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ABSTRACT

Although finding considerable value in Joshua Mitchell's recent *JOP* article about political science commentary on religion, we take issue with his contentions about empirical work on religious influence in politics. We argue that Mitchell has propounded an individualized conceptualization of religion that overlooks the communal nature of religious interaction, a dimension central to translating religious perspectives into political action. Moreover, we argue that conceptualizing religion in terms of preference, values, identity, and choice—which Mitchell regards as antithetical to the true nature of the religious experience—is in fact consistent with the lived religion of most people. Approaches to religious influence in politics rooted in such concepts have yielded considerable predictive power, the appropriate standard by which measurement decisions should be assessed.

In “Religion is Not a Preference,” Joshua Mitchell argues that empirical and normative political scientists have failed to comprehend the power of religious motivation and conduct in the public realm because they have reduced religious experience to a matter of mere preferences, choices, values, and identities (Mitchell 2007). These surrogates are inadequate, he contends, because they are unrelated to the religious self-understanding of believers. Such terms are also inaccurate, representing neither the sacred scriptures of Judaism and Christianity nor the transformative power of faith but rather 18th and 19th century efforts to accommodate religion to modernity.

Mitchell quarrels mainly with normative theorists who use the language of preferences, values, identities, and choices to incorporate religious discourse in the public square. He seems to regard the project represented by John Rawls and others as an effort to “tame” religion so it will fit comfortably into the ongoing conversation that is central to the liberal conceptualization of deliberation in the public square. Mitchell believes that reducing religious reasons to preferences trivializes them, and risks misunderstanding their centrality in the lives of citizens.

But he also takes aim at empirical political science, arguing that likening religion to preference, choices, identities, and values presents the discipline with the “problem of uncomprehended amplitude” (Mitchell, 2007, 360). Although religion has inspired every major upheaval in U.S. history, Mitchell contends, failure to understand the core of religious experience led the discipline to underestimate the motivations of the civil rights movement or, in the international sphere, to predict the religiously-inspired Iranian and Polish revolutions.¹ He argues that “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” (Mitchell, 2007, 360). As empiricists, we focus on this aspect of the article and defer to normative theorists the task of assessing Mitchell’s claims about religion in the public square.

We agree that political science long underestimated the influence of religion on politics, and that the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Christian Right in the U.S., and the role of the pope and the Catholic Church in the Solidarity movement in Poland caught the discipline by surprise (Jelen 1998; Wald et al. 2005; Wald and Wilcox 2006) We have also urged our colleagues to develop more valid and reliable measures of religion, and better theoretically-grounded approaches to the political mobilization of religion (Jelen et al. 1990; Leege and Kellstedt 1993; Wald et al. 2005; Wald and Smidt 1993; Wilcox 1986; Wilcox et al. 1993).

One might thus expect us to endorse Mitchell’s argument. However, we find his purported solution worse than the problem. Ironically, the weakness that we have identified in traditional political science approaches to religion is the prevalence of the very same individualistic, apolitical conceptualization of religious experience that Mitchell here espouses. Following the events that Mitchell cites as evidence of empiricists’ inattention to religion, social scientists who study religion and mass politics have produced a substantial and growing body of scholarship that shows when religion is mobilized into politics, what elements of religion facilitate that mobilization, and how that mobilization takes place. Mitchell tellingly fails to cite a single piece of this research.

In this brief response, we first engage two key assumptions of Mitchell’s argument, and then defend the use of such concepts as preference, choice, value and identity in the empirical study of religion and political behavior.

Must we understand religious experience to understand its impact on politics?

Mitchell argues that political scientists must comprehend the essence of religious ecstatic experience *on its own terms* in order to understand the impact of such experience in politics. He speaks of the transformative experiences of humility and exaltation in poetic language. “In 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 (Mitchell 2007, 352)?

The experiences that Mitchell writes about do not occur in isolation, but within religious communities, where religious leaders and community members help individuals to recognize these experiences, to behave properly while they are happening, and to interpret them afterward. Religious experience is manifest in a mainline Protestant church through contemplation, as part of an alter call in a fundamentalist congregation, and as ecstatic spiritual gifts in Pentecostal churches. One rarely witnesses glossolalia, faith healing, or “being slain the spirit” in Methodist services. It is unusual to hear Latin spoken in worship services of the Assemblies of God, although Latin was the common language of the Catholic Mass prior to Vatican II. Thus the experiences of humility and exaltation are only two of a long list of transformative religious experiences available to laypeople in the United States. The general point here is that it in no way diminishes the authenticity of religious revelation or religious experiences to suggest that some of the meaning of religious phenomena is mediated through human interpretation and human social construction. Perhaps regrettably, humanity is not blessed with Immaculate Perception of things divine.²

We agree that transformative religious experiences are not *merely* preferences, choices, identities, or values. Yet these experiences do not themselves have inherent political content.

People who have had ecstatic religious experiences can be reactionary or revolutionary or apolitical, they can argue for or against gender equality, income redistribution, or the Iraq war (Kellstedt et al. 2007; Thomas and Wilcox 1992; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007; Wallis 1996).

Religious communities help individuals to experience and understand religious ecstasy. Religious elites provide theological interpretations, and religious communities provide a kind of “lived theology” (Moon 2004; Orsi 2006). Then religious and political elites (or perhaps other members of a given religious community) help turn this understanding into political preferences, choices, identities, and values (Leege et al. 2002; Wald et al. 2005; Huckfeldt, et. al. 1993). As political scientists, we need not comprehend the nature of the religious experience but we must understand the ways that this experience affects political thinking and behavior. Indeed, we cannot directly assess the Platonic essence of religious inner states, but we can access the manifestations of these states as religious and political attitudes. And regardless of whether identities and values are critical to religious self-understanding, they are the language that people use to describe their political experiences.

Must Social Science Concepts be Defined by Their Historical Roots?

Mitchell also argues that concepts such as “choice” and “preference” (from the liberal tradition) or “value” and “identity” (from the continental tradition) are relatively new concepts with meanings that are not historically part of the millennia-old traditions of Christianity and Judaism. These concepts are, in the most literal sense, anachronistic, and are not part of the religious self-understanding of these faiths. It is by no means obvious that descriptions or analyses of religion must be “subjectively adequate,” or intelligible to those persons whose

behavior or actions are the object of investigations. Given Mitchell's emphasis on the history of concepts, and his argument that terms cannot legitimately be applied to antecedent phenomena, it would follow that a Marxist analysis of Egyptian religious rituals or a Freudian account of English primogeniture would be ruled out *a priori* on methodological grounds. While the applicability of specific social scientific perspectives to historical circumstances may be controversial, the utility of such applications is ultimately a substantive question, and not one to be settled by methodological or epistemological fiat.

Moreover, the meaning of contemporary social science concepts is not determined only by their philosophical origins. Concepts such as preference and choice, as well as attitude, belief, and democracy, have roots both in philosophy and in ordinary language, and they take on new meanings when embedded in social science theory. And religious understandings change over time, so that regardless of whether choice and values, preferences and identities were originally part of Judaic and Christian theology, they have become integral to the faith traditions today.

Social scientists have a prescribed process by which to assess the adequacy of measures developed to represent concepts in empirical research. We start from the recognition of the "measurement gap" that inevitably separates abstract concepts from the empirical indicators developed in social research (Blalock 1982). The indicators are then assessed for their correspondence to the concept they represent (known as validity) and their consistency of measurement over time (reliability). Measures that fail to achieve prescribed levels of validity and reliability are rejected, and generally fail to generate strong relationships with measures of other theoretically related concepts.

This process has governed the translation of religiously based attitudes into empirical measures – a project that has attracted considerable attention from political scientists and sociologists (Leege and Kellstedt 1993) If our religious measures are untrue to the concepts they represent (as Mitchell’s critique alleges), we should fail to discover much explanatory value. In fact, each of the terms that Mitchell rejects has been represented by one or more measures that yield significant payoff in explaining religiously-based political behavior, as we will demonstrate below.

Do Religious Preferences, Choices, Identities, and Values Exist?

Even if it is essential to understand religious experience in terms that are recognizable to the faith tradition, in fact concepts such as “choice,” “preference,” “value,” and “identity” are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rather than being inappropriately anachronistic, such concepts are necessary to understand the way that religion is experienced by people today. Consider, for example, the notion of “choice.” Mitchell argues that religion is not a choice, “since in religious experience man does not choose God, but rather...God chooses man, by moving him toward humility or toward exaltation.” Yet humans, as beings created in God’s image, possess free will, and have the ability to choose, or to reject, God.

Mitchell may be correct in asserting that Scripture has few references to individuals choosing God, but they are replete with references to them rejecting God, which implies the existence of a choice. The Covenant between the Israelites and God derives much if not all of its force from the fact that the “yoke of the Covenant(s)” is voluntarily accepted by God’s people. One important role of Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) prophets was to remind the Israelites of the

terms of the Covenant, and the consequences of violating the reciprocal agreement with God. Similarly, many Christian denominations point to Luke 23:39-43 in the New Testament, in which Jesus is crucified along with two thieves. One thief chooses to believe in Jesus' divinity, while the other thief makes the opposite choice.

Moreover, choice is central to the religious experiences and identities of many believers. The idea of religious choice is embodied in religious rituals in many Judeo-Christian traditions. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah in Judaism, the sacrament of confirmation in Roman Catholicism (in which one is enlisted as a "soldier for Christ"), or adult baptism by immersion in the Baptist tradition have in common the uncoerced and voluntary acceptance of God's grace. Evangelical Christians speak of the moment of personal salvation as "accepting" Christ. Phrases such as "choose to accept Christ" and "choose Jesus" are common in religious texts and materials, a prominent evangelical magazine is titled "Decision," and a popular evangelical hymn is titled "Almost Persuaded."

Similarly, Americans have preferences about religion that range from the trivial (the time of the worship service), to the profound (theology, and the connection of religion to politics). Some may prefer a church which teaches uncompromising biblical literalism, or one in which the pastor emphasizes the application of theology to contemporary social problems. They may prefer a church with more lively music, or with more imminent religious ecstatic experiences, or even simply one with a coffee bar. And faith traditions and churches offer packages of theology, worship style, and outreach programs to try to gather more adherents.

In language that would surely not be accepted by religious elites, social scientists have described religious markets (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Finke and Stark 1992). Yet this

research does not trivialize religion – indeed it shows that competitive religious markets enhance the overall “consumption” of religious “goods,” as well as the effectiveness of religious socialization (Jelen and Wilcox, 1998) since competition provides incentives to provide more and better religious goods to church members and potential members.

New “firms” enter the market when consumer preferences are not met, as with the formation of megachurches in the suburbs of many large cities, each with a somewhat distinctive blend of theology and worship style. And religious communities frequently work hard to distinguish their “product” from neighboring congregations. Individuals do change churches, switch among denominations, and even cross faith traditions (Green and Guth 1993). Americans on rare occasions convert from Christianity to Islam, somewhat less infrequently switch from Protestantism to Catholicism, more frequently change among Protestant denominations, and frequently change churches within a denomination. This kind of switching is easily conceived as involving choices and preferences, but less easily conceived as God calling someone to change from the Episcopal to the Methodist church.

These preferences and choices have political consequences. In the U.S., evangelical denominations are growing, while mainline churches are in decline (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2007). These faith traditions bring different political voices to the public square, and their changing levels of resources can alter political outcomes. In many parts of the world, dominant religious elites have lobbied for and obtained laws to favor established churches, or to even ban religious conversion, in an effort to mitigate the effects of religious choice and preference (Gill 2000).

The Political Consequences of Religious Choices, Identities, and Preferences

As political scientists, we are interested in the way that religion is translated into political action. The Iranian revolution did not come primarily because God humbled or exalted Shi'ite Muslims in Iran; rather religious and political leaders created and marshaled religious identities and values (Brumberg 2001).

Religious identities and values are also meaningful concepts to most Americans. The identity of “believer” and “non-believer” is central to proselytizing traditions such as Christianity and Islam. Obligation to those who are part of the faith community and those who are outside is a central element in Islam. Whether expressed in laws of ritual purity or matrilineal descent, Judaism has long emphasized boundary maintenance. Among evangelicals, the distinction between those who are “saved” and those who are not has been popularized through the bestselling *Left Behind* novels.

Americans readily identify as Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, and also as Baptist, Methodist, Reform Jew, or Sunni Muslim, although they sometimes create their own eclectic religious worldviews (Bellah et al. 1986). There are finer grained religious identities as well. Many Jews identify with one of the various theological groupings, Catholics often identify as “traditional” or “progressive,” and Protestants often identify as “mainline” or “evangelical,” and sometimes more narrowly as “fundamentalist,” “Pentecostal,” etc. These identities are built by religious leaders, who differentiate their theological tradition from others. Not all religious Americans respond to these religious identities, and some do so more as a signal of their religious commitment than any cognitive identity (Wilcox 1989). Yet especially among more devout citizens, religious identities do seem to be meaningful – they fit well with actual theology and

denominational affiliation, and are important predictors of political mobilization (Green and Guth 1988; Jelen 1991b).

Religious identities are important because religious and political leaders use them to mobilize social movement activism and voting (Layman 2001). Jerry Falwell built the Moral Majority around fundamentalist Christians, and Pat Robertson mobilized Pentecostals through his presidential campaign. But later the Christian Coalition sought to mobilize a broader coalition of evangelicals, and then conservative Christians, building in the process a new religious identity as “people of faith” (Reed 1996). These groups also sought to distinguish identities of evangelicals and conservative Christians from those of social and political outgroup such as homosexuals, liberals, secular humanists, and feminists. This process of polarized group identification and affect was crucial to the mobilization of the Christian Right (Jelen 1991a; Wilcox 1992) and is a staple of cultural politics more generally (Leege et al. 2002).

Parties and candidates have tried to mobilize religious identities through discourse around religious values. Mitchell (p. 358) argues

Religious experience cannot be a ‘value’ because the term ‘value’ already supposes the impossibility of religious experience....to speak of ‘religious values’ is to speak incoherently, since a ‘value is something that man has on his own. But religious experience reveals that man, truly, has nothing of his own, since God is the author of all things.... “Value” is affirmative with respect to man; religious experience is deferential with respect to God.

But the concept of “religious values” does not come from misguided empirical political scientists; it is deeply embedded in the practice of American political mobilization. An internet

search in mid-2007 for the phrase “religious values” returned more than 900,000 hits, many from the web sites of denominations and churches. Thus “religious values” are an important element in religious life. They are an even larger part of political discourse.

Ultimately, the proof of the efficacy of choices, preferences, identities, and values is grounded in empirical research. Studies have shown that these concepts are powerful predictors of attitudes on social issues such as GLBTQ rights, gender equality, abortion, economic and foreign policy, and even the environment (Brewer 2003; Combs and Welch 1982; Cook et al. 1992; Guth et al. 1995), of political participation (Djupe and Grant 2001; Guth and Green 1990; Verba et al. 1995), and vote choice (see especially Layman, 2001).

Conclusion.

Mitchell’s article contains many useful insights. He has quite eloquently reminded us of the transcendent nature of religion, as well as its multifaceted nature. Indeed, the piece in question offers some worthy advice to scholars engaged in operationalizing religious variables (Jelen, 1998).

Nevertheless, we are struck by Mitchell’s apparent conviction that religious aspects of political behavior cannot be described in more contemporary language of the social sciences. While we are in complete agreement that religion is not *simply* a set of preferences, choices, values, or identities, our work, and the work of other empirically-oriented social scientists, suggests that these very concepts have been quite useful in describing and explaining religiously-motivated political behavior. The reason for this is quite simple: Religious experience is not manifestly political. In order for the experience of humility or exaltation to have political

meaning, the experience of the divine must be interpreted and translated into a contemporary political idiom.

In contemporary democratic politics at least, *preferences* are assessed to arrive at individual and collective *choices*. Where religion achieves political relevance, these preferences are often animated by *values* (as opposed, perhaps, to interests). Religiously defined *identities* have repeatedly been shown to provide cognitive structures in which individual and collective *political* preferences are formed, or *political* choices are made at either the individual or aggregate levels.

In no way does the translation of religious experience into policy preferences, identification with partisan or social groups, general value orientations, or vote choice gainsay the authenticity or transcendence of religious experience. Indeed, the translation of such experiences into the *lingua franca* of the profane world of politics poses formidable challenges to religious elites, political leaders, and students of religious politics alike.

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Notes

¹Although religion has played a key role in many social movements, some have been primarily secular, including the GLBTQ movement and 2nd wave feminism. Religion played a decidedly secondary role in the mobilization of labor unions as well.

²Indeed, in his elegant work, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, Glenn Tinder (1989) suggests that human agency plays a prominent role in exegesis precisely because of the core event of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the Fall from Grace in the garden of Eden. Tinder suggests that the resulting corruption of humanity has the unfortunate consequence that our understanding of divine revelation (which may be perfect and inerrant) is tempered with our fallible, corrupt, intellects. Thus, our understanding of religious revelation must be tempered with a good dose of humility.