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Religion, Sacred Values and Conflict

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, JUN 14 2012

In a recent article, Scott Atran – an anthropologist based at the University of Michigan – and Jeremy Ginges – a psychologist at Tel Aviv University – examine cross-cultural surveys and experiments in dozens of societies in order to extract insights into the role that religion and sacred values play in conflicts. They begin their piece with the opening gambit that “religion, in promoting outlandish beliefs and costly rituals, increases ingroup trust but also may increase mistrust and conflict with outgroups”. However, they show that while “sacred values sustain intractable conflicts that defy ‘business-like’ negotiation,” they can also “provide surprising opportunities for resolution”. [1]

In their view, religion often plays an important part in wars, but it is seldom the root cause of conflict itself. Yet while they suggest that there is no necessary direct causal link between religious belief, sacred values, and war, during intergroup conflict protagonists may transform material interests into sacred values and further consolidate them into religious beliefs.

Sacred values are not exclusive to religion; mundane values may be sacralized through rituals linking them to nonreligious sacred values, like the nation. Interestingly, though, secular social contracts that “regulate individual interests to share costs and benefits of cooperation can be more liable to collapse,” and “awareness that more advantageous distributions of risks and rewards may be available in the future makes defection more likely”.

Pointing out that “small-scale hunter-gatherer societies, which best approximate ancestral conditions, lack omniscient and omnipotent supernaturals,” Atran and Ginges contend that it is useful to see religions as culturally evolved by-products of large group formation. It is the threat to “primary group loyalties” posed by “modern multiculturalism and global exposure to multifarious values” that leads fundamentalist movements to “push back” in defence of primary group loyalty.

A phenomenon described as the “backfire effect,” is identified which circumscribes many efforts to broker peace. In many studies that Atran and Ginges carried out with colleagues in Palestine, Israel, Iran, India, Indonesia and Afghanistan, they found that offers of money and/or other material incentives which compromise sacred values increased anger and “backfire, increasing violence toward compromise”. The referenced studies on Iran and Palestine highlight some fascinating observations:

“In a 2010 study, Iranians who regarded Iran’s right to a nuclear program as a sacred value more violently opposed sacrificing Iran’s nuclear program for conflict-resolution deals involving substantial economic aid, or relaxation of sanctions, than the same deals without aid or sanctions.....In a 2005 study in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian refugees who held their ‘right of return’ to former homes in Israel as a sacred value more violently opposed abandoning this right for a Palestinian state plus substantial economic aid than the same peace deal without aid.”

From these observations, Atran and Ginges also offer some recommendations that could help to solve conflicts fuelled by religious conviction. Although, as previously mentioned, it is observed that casting conflicts as sacred initially obstructs standard business-like negotiation tactics, making strong symbolic gestures such as sincere apologies and demonstrations of respect for the other’s values generates surprising flexibility, even among militants and political leaders, and may enable subsequent material negotiations.

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They conclude that “In an age where religious and sacred causes are resurgent, there is urgent need for joint scientific effort to understand them” and propose that “In-depth ethnography, combined with cognitive and behavioural experiments among diverse societies (including those lacking a world religion), can help identify and isolate the moral imperatives for decisions on war or peace.”

More research of this kind is certainly needed. Since 9/11, a slew of literature has surfaced discussing religion and the possible connections it has to violence[2]. In the process, there has been an overload of impassioned polemics and these seem to have drowned out the conclusions from empirically focused and scientifically-based studies on religion and its role in violent conflict. Hopefully, studies of the nature exhibited by Atran and Ginges will start to carry more leverage than grossly misleading paradigms such as Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis.

Perhaps more significantly, though, this focus on sacred values in conflicts may provide vital scholarly vantage points from which to see the concept of war. Arguably, the most common template of understanding harnessed to understand war is the rational actor theory. Yet the usefulness of the paradigm, in the context of understanding war both today and in the past, may be more limiting than scholars would argue. It could be convincingly contested that over the course of human history, war has been seen as ennobling, exciting, and bonding. Through mortal combat, humans have the ability to form bonds with genetic strangers, and those bonds deeply identify individuals with a group. Many wars have been fought over the question of who we are, leading to groups of genetic strangers fighting other groups of genetic strangers. From an evolutionary and biological perspective at least, this makes little sense and it is not particularly rational. Sacred values are important because they differ from material or instrumental values in that they incorporate moral beliefs that drive action in ways that seem dissociated from prospects for success. So examining the role of sacred values in war and conflict may offer greater opportunities for breakthroughs into peace in seemingly intractable conflicts than hitherto realised.

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[1] This conclusion is supported by the actions of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy; as well as much of the “faith-based diplomacy” literature (i.e. Douglas Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003). There is also an e-IR article on the subject, which includes a good bibliography of the literature [see here]).

[2] For some examples of poorly researched so-called scholarship examining the subject see: Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002), Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books 2007).

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Faith in the Twenty-First Century (2015) and *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* (2014).