

The Science of the Sacred: Response to Professor Kamolnick

by Scott Atran & Robert Axelrod

Professor Kamolnick argues that a *Science* article [1] of ours that we cited in our interview with Ramadan Shallah in the last issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*, [2] which was meant to give an indication to the reader of the kinds of issues we are exploring, was conceptually confused. We allegedly failed to give adequate definitions of “the sacred” and “the symbolic,” the distinctions we did provide were “equivocally operationalized,” and we misunderstood the difference between what is symbolic and what is material.

Nowhere in Kamolnick’s critique is there a discussion of actual empirical findings. There is only a polemic over the meaning of certain words and ideas and how they fail to cover or adequately take into account those of important 19th and early 20th century sociologists, like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, as Professor Kamolnick chooses to interpret them. Instead of operationalized and empirically tested distinctions, Kamolnick offers his considered opinions and speculations about the true sense of these words and ideas, especially as he thinks they apply to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

For example, Professor Kamolnick argues that by characterizing the sacred as "non-instrumental," we obfuscate the real nature of both. According to Kamolnick:

obliteration of the infidel usurper of a land once conquered by Islam, and therefore always a waqf, is instrumental in the extreme. Absolutely instrumental. In fact, it is the height of selfishness that would guarantee not only the greatest of privileges of a sensuously blissful paradise for the martyr, but the intercessory rights of the martyr to provide for seventy loved ones.

Now, Kamolnick may define "instrumental" any way he likes; however, from our point of view (and that of the standard rational choice theories that underlie much of economics and political science, as well as any alternatives that seek to test and refute the standard theories), his notion of "absolutely instrumental" is an oxymoron. Indeed, we and others have argued that when people hold values to be non-fungible “absolutes” that is precisely what characterizes such values as sacred. This operational characterization of the sacred correlates highly with other operational characterizations (immunity to monetary tradeoffs, susceptibility to concessions of no evident material value as far as subjects are concerned, emotional salience, etc.), which yield quite reliable empirical results and predictions.[3]

As for the selfish and instrumental "intercessory rights of the martyr to provide seventy loved ones," this is mere speculation based on no study of actual or would-be martyrs (the reference that accompanies the claim concerns an interpretation of Muslim religious exegesis). No empirical study has ever shown that seeking loved ones in paradise is a significant motivator of martyrdom, instrumental or otherwise. Indeed, in fieldwork with jihadis across Eurasia and North Africa, never have we heard this cited by would-be martyrs, failed suicide bombers, supporters, trainers, and so forth. In fact, whenever we've brought up the issue, leaders of organizations that sponsor and support suicide attacks all told us more or less what the Hamas people told us, namely, that "they would slam the door in the face" of anyone who sought martyrdom to gain virgins in heaven.[4]

As a further example of our supposed confusion, Kamolnick notes that we make reference to possible evolutionary underpinnings of some sacred values (e.g., a cross-cultural unwillingness to trade off children or community for material gain) but not others (e.g., sacred cows in India or sacred forests and burial grounds). But all we are saying here is that some sacred values appear to be culturally universal, with a possible evolutionary grounding (e.g. tribal territory), whereas others appear to be culturally particular (e.g. importance of acquiring nuclear capability for some Iranians), with no direct support from any biological adaptation to ancestral environments. [5] Similar considerations apply for related symbolic aspects of sacred values, such as universal gestures of submission to higher authority in terms of bowing, prostration and throat baring, as opposed to the culturally particular implications of schoolgirls wearing headscarves for Muslim religious notions of modesty and submission to God versus secular French notions of equality and the universal citizen.

Kamolnick makes no reference to the actual empirical studies in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* that operationalized the framework of sacred values used in the *Science* article. [6] That framework focuses on immunity to tradeoffs and privileged relationships to emotions (especially related to violence). These and other experiments and surveys with thousands of randomly sampled Palestinians and Israelis deal with hypothetical yet realistic trade-offs for peace. We consistently find that people's opposition to giving up things they consider sacred actually *increases* when material incentives to compromise are offered. Support for violence *decreases*, however, when an adversary makes symbolic gestures of no evident material consequence (from the subjects' perspective) that show recognition of the other's sides sacred values.

More recently, this finding has been replicated in India with respect to the Kashmir conflict, [7] in Indonesia with respect to the importance of Sharia among students in moderate and radical madrassahs, [8] and in Iran with respect to acquisition of nuclear capability [9] (with a much larger study about to come out that involves over two thousand respondents and 28 of 30 Iranian provinces, which clarifies some problematic issues in the original paper: for example, we now find significant differences among Iranians with respect to the perceived importance of acquiring nuclear energy capability, making it relatively immune to "carrots and sticks" incentives and

disincentives, which only harden attitudes, versus the insignificance of material incentives or disincentives in hardening attitudes to acquisition of weapons capability).

In these and other peer-reviewed scientific papers, we and our colleagues have also discussed relevant aspects of Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane [10] as well as Weber's concept of value-rational.[11] And we have tried, where possible, to note the implications of their ideas for operationalizing differences in willingness towards tradeoffs that could be tested and then experimentally replicated or refuted.

Kamolnick's discussion of our use of "sacred values," and the entire philosophical critique behind it, makes no evaluation of these substantial empirical findings. In the end, they are pretty much irrelevant to what he surmises in the quote below to be the correct reading of the nature of seemingly intractable political conflict:

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not result from some irrational, non-instrumental symbolic attachment that subverts a more rational sense of one's genuine best moves... In this writer's opinion its roots lie in what is truly an existential conflict between two peoples that while involving symbolic and sacralized dimensions, it is ultimately mundane and this-worldly.

In fact, we pretty much agree with this opinion. The scientific issue is to separate out what people themselves believe to be the difference between what is identifiably mundane (e.g. a structured collection of stones) and what is considered sacred (e.g. a holy temple). The fact that political leaders from vastly different cultural milieux (e.g., The US National Security Council, Hamas politburo, Israeli Knesset, etc.), and the many thousands of people in their supporting populations that we have tested, readily respond to our conceptual distinctions in clear yet surprising ways (i.e., not predicted from available standard theories) that are regularly replicated and independently assessed (e.g., in studies of correlated emotions), [12] suggests that attention to the operational distinctions we have made are relevant to understanding seemingly intractable conflicts.

Because of the emotional unwillingness of those in conflict situations to negotiate sacred values, conventional wisdom suggests that negotiators should either leave sacred values for last in political negotiations or should try to bypass them with sufficient material incentives. Our empirical findings and historical analysis suggest that conventional wisdom is wrong. In fact, offering to provide material benefits in exchange for giving up a sacred value actually makes settlement more difficult because people see the offering as an insult rather than a compromise. But we also found that making symbolic concessions of no obvious apparent material benefit (from the tested standpoint of the parties involved) might open the way to resolving seemingly irresolvable conflicts. There are, of course, various material consequences to any sacred stand,

and various material means may be used to achieve sacred ends. But in sacred endeavors, only the ends count, whatever the means. In the case of PIJ's Ramadan Shallah – in possible opposition to Hamas's Khaled Meshaal [13] – the repossession of all of historical Palestine is a sacred duty that apparently admits of no compromise and must be fought out, with any available means, to the end.

In sum, while Kamolnick raises some interesting philosophical issues about the meanings of the words "sacred," "symbolic," "rational," "material," "instrumental" and so forth, he appears to have wholly ignored the quite substantial literature on sacred values that has come out of cognitive and social psychology over the last 15 years or so. [14] The intent of that work is not to adequately capture the entire philosophical range, connotation, or possible references of interesting words and ideas, but to precisely test whether, and under what conditions, certain operationally defined cognitive distinctions can predict significant differences in decisions and choice of behavior. True, this neither exhausts nor captures the full richness of the sacred in human life or political conflict, which is less a tractable topic and program for science than an intriguing problem for philosophy.

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Notes

- [1] S. Atran, R. Axelrod, R. Davis (2007) Sacred barriers to conflict resolution. *Science* 317: pp. 1039–1040
- [2] S. Atran, R. Axelrod (2010). Interview with Ramadan Shallah, Secretary-General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. IV, Issue 2, May.
- [3] J. Ginges, S. Atran, D. Medin, K. Shikaki (2007) Sacred bounds on rational resolution of violent political conflict. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104: pp. 7357-7360.
- [4] S. Atran (2010) *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un) Making of Terrorists*. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins.
- [5] S. Atran, R. Axelrod (2008) Reframing Sacred Values. *Negotiation Journal*, 24: pp. 221-246.
- [6] J. Ginges et al (2007), op. cit.
- [7] S. Sachdeva, D. Medin (2009) Group Identity Salience in Sacred Value Based Cultural Conflict: An Examination of the Hindu-Muslim Identities in the Kashmir and Babri Mosque Issues. In: *Proceedings of the 31th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society (CogSci)*, Washington, D.C.
- [8] J. Ginges, S. Atran (2009). Non-instrumental reasoning over sacred values: An Indonesian field experiment. In *Psychology of Learning and Motivation, Vol. 50: Moral Judgment and Decision Making*, In: D. Bartels, C. Bauman, L. Skitka & D. Medin, Eds.: San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- [9] M. Dehghani, R. Iliev, S. Sachdeva, S. Atran, J. Ginges, D. Medin (2009). 'Emerging sacred values: Iran's nuclear program', *Judgment and Decision Making*, 7: pp. 930-933.
- [10] J. Ginges, S. Atran (2009). Non-instrumental reasoning over sacred values, op. cit.
- [11] J. Ginges, S. Atran (2010). Moral bounds to decisions to support or oppose deadly intergroup violence. Under review.
- [12] J. Ginges, S. Atran. 2008. 'Humiliation and the inertia effect: Implications for understanding violence and compromise in intractable intergroup conflicts'. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 8: pp. 281–294.
- [13] S. Atran, R. Axelrod (2010). Why We Talk to Terrorists. *New York Times*, June 30.
- [14] See, for example: J. Baron, M. Spranca (1997). Protected values. *Organizational Behavior and Decision Processes*. 70: pp.1–16; P. Tetlock (2003). Thinking the unthinkable: Sacred values and taboo cognitions. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 7: pp. 320-324.