
Scott Atran - Violent Extremism and Sacred Values

August 29, 2011

Host: Chris Mooney



In less than two weeks, the ten year anniversary of the deadliest terror attack on U.S. soil—9/11—will be upon us.

In the past decade, there has been much debate and discussion about the root causes of terrorism and violent extremism. There has also been considerable scientific study of the matter.

Fortunately, *Point of Inquiry* recently caught up with the anthropologist Scott Atran, a world leader in this research. Atran has met with terrorists face to face. He has interviewed mujahedin, met with Hamas, talked to the plotters of the Bali bombing—and sometimes found his life at risk by doing so.

There's probably nobody better if you want to talk about terrorism, what motivates it, and how these extremes fit within the broad tapestry of human nature.

Scott Atran is a research director in anthropology at the French National Center for Scientific Research, and holds a variety of appointments at other academic institutions. He's also the author of several books including *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* and *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*. He has published frequent op-eds in the *New York Times* and his research has been published in *Science*, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and other leading publications.

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Listening right now... interesting how close Atran's account comes to the way Islamist terrorists are depicted in the movie "Four Lions"

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 5:14am by [Infozombie](#)

[Comment #1](#)

Finally, someone from a skeptical/humanist podcast interviews Scott Atran, someone who might be considered an expert on the topic of terrorism and the role religion does (or doesn't play) with it. Why did this take so long? Atran knows more about religious beliefs and what motivates them than Hitchens, Dawkins and Sam Harris put together, but has been ignored by skeptics/humanists for the past 10 years, all while doing high profile work on the subject! Well, better late than never, I guess...

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 6:11am by [hardindr](#)

[Comment #2](#)

Oh well. I though postmodernism well and dead, but Atran is clearly a dyed-in-the-wool postmodernist. The interview was chock full of fallacies, including constantly changing the definition of "sacred", "religion" and "transcendental" to allow the postmodernist self-congratulation to pass through unnoticed.

Just one example: is the definition of religion is expanded to include all group identities, as Mr Atran defines it, then ALL wars are religious, including all wars of the 20th century, contrary to his fallacious assertion to the contrary. But if the definition of religion is restricted to those modes which only include some belief in a supernatural power, then Mr Atran's other arguments fail.

This word play, redefining words as we go to fit our prejudice, is why postmodernism lost credibility. And this interview was just one more nail in that coffin. That Chris Mooney, yet again, fell into that trap doesn't surprise me.

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 7:44am by [Denis Robert](#)

[Comment #3](#)

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Indeed, there was quite a vibe of "reason is just another of approaching reality that is no better than any other" throughout the whole interview. Also, his views about Dawkins, Dennet and Harris are simply strawmen.

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 8:15am by [Javalari](#)

[Comment #4](#)

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Uhm, Atran is sympathetic to logical positivism. Were we listening to the same interview?

Having said that, you would be hard to find a consistent definition of what religion is, even from scholars who had spent their careers studying it. Atran and another scholar offer one [here](#).

I am skeptical of Atran's insistence that all "ism"s are comparable to religion, but his ideas intrigue me. Guess we'll have to see if his research into this area bears fruit.

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 8:19am by [hardindr](#)

[Comment #5](#)

Not a bad interview. I read **Talking to the Enemy**, and I thought it made some valid points; Prof. Atran states that most terrorists are psychologically normal, and they get swept up in the scene mainly through "identity politics", and also—just plain friendship. I think that these data are accurate and often overlooked by many commentators. However it does seem that there is a strong dose of Post Modernism in this thesis.

Posted on Aug 30, 2011 at 2:02pm by [mid atlantic](#)

[Comment #6](#)

Wow, never knew I was a post-modernist. Maybe that's what they now call doing empirical science to refute empirically unfounded claims to truth.

Sacred values are values that drive actions to goals that are independent, or all out of proportion, to likely or evident prospects of success. They are generally insensitive to quantity and to framing effects, and immune to tradeoffs. The violation of sacred values, as well as attempts to trade them off for material incentives or disincentives (carrots / rewards or sticks / sanctions), usually lead to a "backfire effect" that generates anger, moral outrage, and increased support for violence. By contrast, their mere recognition by an opposing group tends to lessen the violence between the groups. Data supporting these aspects and other aspects of sacred values, and their application to conflicts and negotiations in Israel/Palestine, Iran/USA, Pakistan/Kashmir/India, Indonesia, Nigeria, ProLife vs Prochoice, etc. can be found in my research teams's publications in Science, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA, Proceedings of the Royal Society B, and elsewhere. Neuroimaging signatures for sacred values are described in a forthcoming issue of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Soc B., and other publications on my website sitemaker.umich.edu/satran/home

Discussions of the empirical evidence for what drives suicide bombers can also be found there, in my book Talking to the Enemy, and my

testimony to the US House of Representatives, Senate Armed Services Committee, and US Navy and Air Force.

My definitions and empirical studies of religion can be found in the In Gods We Trust, In Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Cognition, Biological Theory, and elsewhere.

Posted on Aug 31, 2011 at 1:28am by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #7](#)

First, again I have to thank Chris M for presenting a very fine and thought-provoking interview with an excellent guest. I was very critical of CFI's choice of Chris Mooney as a POI host, but I'm now quite happy to withdraw that criticism. Though I still differ with you, Chris (and apparently with Scott Atran), on some points regarding religion and its consequences, you are an excellent host/interviewer and I now really look forward to each of your podcasts!

It seems to me that the key insight Scott Atran offered in the interview is that we human beings – all of us – are driven far more by our social and emotional needs and environments than those of us who cherish reason and critical thinking will often acknowledge. To the degree that we in the atheist community continue to make this error, I think it will take us far longer to effectively reduce the harms promulgated through religious superstitions, particularly in the U.S.

Nevertheless, I would really like to discuss the breadth of consequences created by god-beliefs/unreasoned faith vs. enlightenment type beliefs with Mr. Atran. It's really difficult for me to imagine that someone of his depth of knowledge and intellect can't appreciate, if not better quantify, the differences between those two worldviews and their net consequences. I think the claim that Mr. Atran is a "postmodernist" arises because in the interview he seemed to equate blatant religious superstition with more rational evidence-based thinking, asserting that both are simply alternative worldviews or sets of "sacred values" and that that claim is all there is to it, so to speak.

And speaking of 9/11, while some of the hijackers had secular education and science backgrounds to various degrees (no pun intended), wasn't the desire to go to Allah's heaven a very key motivation for committing the 9/11 atrocities, and didn't their understanding of religious martyrdom blind them to normal and healthy human compassion?

Be that as it may, Mr. Atran, if you read this, would you mind explicitly defining your use of the term, "transcendental?" That would be helpful to me before I listen to your POI interview a second time.

Posted on Aug 31, 2011 at 7:31am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #8](#)

It's not a question of the logical and empirical well-groundedness of science as opposed to other forms of thought. It's whether reason, evidence and science suffice to overturn other forms of thought. In very restricted areas, it is possible and has been done. But there is little evidence science can or does challenge deeply held religious beliefs in ways to cause their abandonment. First, reason is used for victory and persuasion by most people most of the time, not for enlightenment or truth, and so if commitment to religion endures on other grounds then it is immune to reason (evidence for this is overwhelming, in line of Leon Festinger's "when prophecy fails"). Second, scientists tend to focus laser-like on areas of their expertise and have no evident advantage in persuasion or insight when it comes to matters of personal, political or social importance – at least not enough to persuade people (other than a few marginal converts from time to time) to give up ghosts that suit their way of life. Third, science and reason are used in the wrong way, as a hammer that fails to hit home, when it should try to leverage irrationality to advantage (that's the point of our work in political negotiations).

But as far as many new atheist assertions about religion and terrorism are concerned, they are just blatantly false. I remember confronting Foucault once with evidence that his interpretation of Cesalpino's way of classifying nature was just palindromic wrong. His response: "perhaps, but the general story is still right." That is precisely how Hitchens, Harris and Dawkins respond (Dan Dennett actually does consider inconvenient facts for more than two seconds).

Posted on Aug 31, 2011 at 2:14pm by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #9](#)

I see no harm in Scott Atran reminding us how subjective is most people's reasoning; how little we use it to challenge ourselves as to the strength and accuracy of our most cherished points of view. Those apostates among us will know that best!

BTW prof what's with palindromic? I really enjoyed your interview with Chris Mooney. The quoted numbers of religious wars was surprising.

Posted on Aug 31, 2011 at 4:38pm by [B9K9](#)

[Comment #10](#)

Transcendental = immune to refutation from logic and empirical evidence

Martyrs for Allah may dream of paradise, although: 1. Anyone seeking virgins in heaven would have the door slammed in their face by any serious terror-sponsoring group (that's more a sexual fantasy of our society, merged with attempts to give a "rational choice" explanation in terms of perverted preferences); 2. The pathways to violence of jihadis

is quite similar (including political methods, suicide bombings, education, SES, levels of commitment, etc.) to those of the anarchists a century or so ago. STATE, military, police, and popular reaction to the anarchist threat (secular and atheist) almost exactly parallel reactions to the jihadi threat (though the anarchists actually did succeed in killing the Russian Czar, Queen of Austria, King of Italy, President of France, President of the USA, and the Austrian Archduke to spark WWI).

“palindrome” is something my iPad put in when I wrongly typed “plain”

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 12:52am by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #11](#)

The point of friction seems to be whether or not Religious identity and motivation are a special type of Cultural identity and motivation.

New Atheism suggests it is, but we don't need an overall answer. We need the question investigated within the context of specific phenomena, let's say kamikaze pilots.

A reasonable guess would be that those WWII combatants were profoundly Culturally motivated, and informed only trivially by their (let's say) Shinto identity.

There's a point at which it would become disingenuous to downplay their Religion being a significant factor. Say if it's found likely that those individuals felt their action was supported by their sect's teachings of the afterlife, gods, impurity, dogma, piety, etc. We can discover if that sect's teachings lent weight to that questionable act. Whether we think that act was morally permissible seems besides the point.

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 2:17am by [- Blamer ..](#)

[Comment #12](#)

If you read the letters and diaries of the kamikaze, few believed that they were about to die for the emperor, none really for religion. They were fairly well-educated in science and other subjects, all volunteered for their missions (many saying they couldn't let their friends down, often other pilots who were volunteering), many wrote poems and often quoted German idealists and romantics. They were willing die, said some, to save the spiritual soul of their country (in terms similar to De Gaulle's call to the French to join the resistance against Fascism and the Nazis to save “l'idee de la France”).

Religion is a conceptual and emotional vehicle that fits just about anything people can imagine for war or peace, creativity or suppression of creativity, liberty to dream and fight oppression or subservience to tyranny, and so forth. The Civil Rights movement, for example, was profoundly based in religious thinking, in religious institutions, and in religious sentiments that opposed the “original sin” of slavery. Only towards the end, from about 1955 on, did liberal intellectuals get

seriously involved. Ben Franklin wanted the motto of the American Republic to be “Rebellion to Tyranny is Obedience to God,” but Marx was also right that religion often serves to opiate the masses.

A virulent form of politically-motivated religious extremism is, of course, critical to the jihadi movement. But historically, religious motivation is not necessary for violent extremism (consider the anarchists, fascist black and brown shirts, left wing terrorists of the 1960s and 1970s, etc.); and today religious motivation is by no means sufficient to motivate violent extremism even among would-be jihadis. According to Gallup and Pew polls, about 7 percent of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslim have expressed strong sympathy for Bin Laden and his cause, near double that show some sympathy, but only a very, very small percentage of even those who express sympathy the cause commit to violence (some few thousands: for example, about 3000 arrested for Jihadi activities in Europe, with traditional religious education NEGATIVELY correlated with support for Jihad even among Muslims in European prisons; in the USA, there have been about 500 arrests, fewer than 100 serious cases, and most of these caught through law enforcement entrapment – since the best predictor of joining and carrying out jihad is who your friends are, and since people almost randomly pick up and fall out of the pathway to violence, there is a better than even chance that those caught through entrapment would have never carried out a plot to fruition if left to their own).

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 4:54am by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #13](#)

What bothered me in the interview is the rather cavalier use of the word sacred. The Cambridge dictionaries online defines the word Sacred as

- considered to be holy and deserving respect, especially because of a connection with a god
- connected with religion
- considered too important to be changed

I think Mr Atran is tacitly using the third meaning as a way to lump everybody together, from jihadist to Norwegians, scientists and secular humanists. Being a scientist and secular humanist, I find it quite offensive. It is not because of dogma that I hold my beliefs. When I look at the world, I simply see that more technologically advanced planes crash less often, and that people living under democracy and human rights seem happier, especially women, gays and minorities. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t call these values “sacred” because they are always opened to being questioned (remember Churchill: “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others”). This is why I would certainly think twice before killing anybody, especially innocent civilians, to protect them.

So when Mr. Atran says that most recent wars had nothing to do with religion, it might be true in the strict sense. But those calling for war

certainly had moral certitudes and dogmas and disrespect of human life on par with religious demagogues. The idea of the “Sacred” might have been a good evolutionary tool for social cohesion in the past, but in today’s multicultural world filled with destructive technologies, it has become a bug, not a feature.

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 7:31am by [Nicolas](#)

[Comment #14](#)

Is consideration of the thoughts of individual kamikaze pilots really the level of behavior that is relevant?

Isn’t the justification on a societal basis the level on which this discussion should take place if we’re going to speak productively about Japanese actions in WWII or of any other war?

Of course religion wasn’t and isn’t the *only* justification for almost any war, ever. Who has ever asserted that? Certainly not the “new atheists,” as far as I’ve ever heard or read.

It’s obviously true that all wars have a multiplicity of underlying causes, many of which are not proximate to religion, per se.

But it’s also true that god beliefs have been, at absolute minimum, a great motivator for troops in the vast majority of armed conflicts throughout history.

As Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote (p. 137 in my paperback) in his wonderful *Travels with Herodotus*, “In the realm of human affairs, admittedly, one also needs a pretext (for war). It is important to give it the rank of a universal imperative or of a divine commandment. The range of choices is not great: either it is that we must defend ourselves, or that we have an obligation to help others, or that we are fulfilling heaven’s will. The optimal pretext would link all three of these motives. The attackers should appear in the glory of the anointed, in the role of those who have found favor in his chosen god’s eye.”

Consider for a simple example the American civil war. I’d bet anything that conflict is counted among “non-religious” wars in the statistics Mr. Atran cites. But do you think it would have been as brutal and long-lasting had the military officers and the clergy on *both* sides not constantly informed the troops that God was on their respective side demanding victory? Otherwise, might the opposing troops who marched in lines into hailstorms of lead balls have insisted a bit more on the use of brains before bullets as a means of conflict resolution? Can anyone reasonably say the fact that almost all of those soldiers had been taught that glory awaited them in an afterlife was a peripheral factor?

Regarding the 9/11 hijackers, they didn’t seem to have “the door slammed in their face” by Al Queda, which at the time at least was a pretty serious terrorist organization, was it not? And had the hijackers not held their views of an afterlife with Allah, wouldn’t the actualization of their plan to immolate themselves and thousands of others at least

have been considerably less likely?

Yet as above, it seems to me that it's not the thought processes of individual mass murderers who are immediately relevant because we can't address the thoughts of dead men – whether kamikaze or Islamic. We can only constructively address the cultural circumstances giving rise to such actions and the dogmas such people were taught to believe and to then examine the effects of those on humanity as a whole, no?

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 7:56am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #15](#)

My use of the word “sacred” emerges from a technical, scientific literature, much as the word “rational” does as in rational choice theory. Above I have enumerated a number of specific properties attached to the concept. For those who don't think this concept of “sacred” corresponds to their intuitive or dictionary sense, then substitute “X” for “sacred” and absolutely nothing changes in my argument.

As for al Qaeda and seeking virgins in heaven, I have interviewed such people (as well as Hamas, Jemaah Islamiyah, Lashkar-e-Tayibah, etc.). I've run experiments with their leaders and foot soldiers, and experimentally designed surveys with supporting populations. If anyone has data showing the contrary of what I found – namely, that almost any would-be martyr who wants to blow himself up to have virgins in heaven would not get a foot inside the door of any serious jihadi group (including all known groups that have targeted the USA) then I am happy to acknowledge my error. But as far as I know, and any intel guys I have talked to know, there is no such contrary evidence. Maybe someone like that sneaks through, but it's rare (Mohammed Atta was a sexually peculiar case, but quite unique and unlike the other 9/11 pilot bombers whose friends, family and neighbors I interviewed).

As for the Civil War, the letters and diaries of soldiers (see for example, James McPherson's Book for Cause and Comrades: Why Men fought the Civil War) don't reveal a preoccupation with the afterlife, but with the moral issues of slavery vs community and states rights, which were indeed taken to reflect God's preferences. But then, as Durkheim wisely noted long ago, “are not God and Group the same?” A sentiment that Darwin also evoked in the Descent of Man (the greater such sentiment and willingness to sacrifice for it, the likelier tribes will win out over other tribes, he argued).

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 11:20am by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #16](#)

Mr. Atran,
First, thanks for responding here to the queries and remarks of strangers.

I'm sure we all appreciate your taking time to do so after your POI interview was posted.

I'm looking forward to listening to that interview again and also to reading some of the dialogue you've participated in on edge.org.

At the same time, I have to say that my own deep immersion in religion earlier in life, and subsequent experience with deeply devout friends and family, cause me to think that your surveys, no matter how carefully designed, might not be revealing some very profound religious motivations. Maybe those sorts of motivations might be immune to being revealed through surveys taken by Western infidels like you or me?

In any event, I don't believe I ever raised the "virgin" issue and I'm not sure why you keep bringing it up. To me, it's something of a distraction. But are you really suggesting that the promise of becoming a martyr for Allah isn't a key recruitment aspect for suicide bombers in Israel, Iraq, and Afghanistan?

Someone shows up at jihadi HQ and says, "I want to be a martyr," and those in charge reply, "Go away, we don't want you," right?

Then who *are* the people who form the long procession of suicide bombers?

I've read that they are folk, especially the young girls (who presumably wouldn't be thrilled by the prospect of reaching eternity with boy virgins) who are desperate for a variety of pragmatic reasons. At the same time, they don't seem to come from the ranks of desperate atheists or impoverished Mormons or Vipassana meditation devotees...

And why *do* we call the groups we refer to as "jihadis" by that distinctly Islamic term? They're not just groups *generally* interested in morality and group cohesion are they? Aren't their agendas rather more specific to a particular sort of god belief and associated scripture interpretation?

Last, my personal experience leads me also to disagree vehemently that "God and Group are the same." Both can be employed as motivators through desire for loyalty, granted, but that's where their similarities end, so how useful is such a statement?

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 12:49pm by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #17](#)

Almost all who want to become martyrs are self-seekers motivated by any number of reasons. More and more we find petty criminals involved who do it because they want to be more than just petty criminals (this is, in part, an unintended consequence of stopping the flow of money to jihadi organizations so now people who plot have to find money where they can, and criminal networks are the easiest to tap into). Interestingly, economic theory of petty criminal behavior in terms of opportunity costs fails completely to explain why such people are

willing to sacrifice their lives, the totality of their self-interests, for certain death and no material layoffs.

Jihadi groups, to the extent they exist as organizations (the exception rather than the rule as most jihadi plots are homegrown Expressions of “organized anarchy”) select people depending on a variety of criteria. al Qaeda never really recruited anyone, but accepted about 15 to 20 percent of candidate proposals for funding and support. Most Qaeda guys in the days of glory until 9–11 were married, middle class, science educated. Paradise was as much of concern to them as to a run of the mill Christian fundamentalist (although muslim paradise is a bit more colorful).

It is interesting to note that only people I have ever found able to persuade would-be martyrs not to be martyrs are salafi groups because they are close in enough in spirit to touch these guys and turn them.

The Quran and Hadith play no real role. Most of these guy are “born again” in their late teens and early twenties and have little, if any, religious education. Among the poorer, rural groups in Pakistan, Indonesia and Yemen, jihadi preachers “read” from the Quran saying that the Prophet instructed young Muslims to fight Pakistan and America. The kids are ignorant and believe it. When tribal elders point out that there was no America or Pakistan in the Prophet’s time, they disappear that night. Madrassas are also important for the rural poor. But no global or transnational organization worth it’s salt is interested in these guys; they want people conversant in languages, able to blend into alien societies, use GPS, computers, chemicals, and so on. So no one involved in an attack against the west was educated in a madrassas, contrary to what Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins imply (although a few guys spent a few weeks in upscale religious schools that actually discouraged parroting and rote learning of the kind suggested as responsible for “religious brainwashing” – indeed, Jemaah Islamiyah careful chose operatives who were well rounded).

As for women, Darwin first pointed out that the vast majority of killings in a society are done by young men between the ages of 15 and 30 (the figure is 88 percent for killings in the history of the USA). Men tend to kill in groups, and more anonymously than women. Most killings by women are of people who threaten their families or who physically abuse them. The same is true of the jihad. In Chechnya, however, about one third of suicide attacks have been by women (also among the secular Tamil tigers, but that’s another story). Yet every known case of a Chechen women martyr is as a “black widow,” whose immediate family members were killed by Russian forces; and most of the killings by the women specifically target those perceived personally responsible for the killings (although there have been a few attacks oairplanes, subways, the Moscow theater, but under the direction of male handlers)

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 1:29pm by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #18](#)

According to Gallup and Pew polls, about 7 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslim have expressed strong sympathy for Bin Laden and his cause (@Scott)

Averaging out across a whole religion (or country) is watering down the effect we're interested in. It's a diverse group, so the focus ought to stay on the implicated Sect/s. Then we hone in on the actual religious teachings we expect these men internalised about the world and their place in it. Benign or otherwise.

Is consideration of the thoughts of individual kamikaze pilots really the level of behavior that is relevant?

Isn't the justification on a societal basis the level on which this discussion should take place...? (@Brad)

I'm unconvinced. Religious motivations and identity are inherently personal, so a good understanding of my society won't give you good insight into my religious convictions. You might approach that insight if you narrowly define "society" to mean the group of people with whom I explicitly share my religious ideas (the local mosque, immediate family, etc).

Posted on Sep 01, 2011 at 9:50pm by [- Blamer ..](#)

[Comment #19](#)

I haven't had a chance to read all the comments here, but I'd like to echo the sentiment that it's nice to see the interviewee come by and take part in the discussion.

Scott, if you wouldn't like to be called a postmodernist, I would suggest not saying things like "science is good for science." Isn't that what any postmodernist would say, that science is just one arbitrary way of looking at things? Chris tried bailing you out by conflating this claim with the different claim that "reason/science isn't good for *convincing people*," and perhaps that's ultimately your position (I haven't read your books), but that certainly wasn't what you said then, and it wasn't the vibe I got throughout the lecture.

I'm doubly confused if you are a logical positivist, as someone called you above. I don't know the terminology (philosophy is not my field), but "logical positivist" is something my theist friends call me when they think I'm taking science too seriously. So, wouldn't you instead say that "science is good for reality," or is someone (me, you, whoever called you that) here confused?

Switching gears, you basically compared terrorists to any college kid getting heavily involved in some movement. Well, I had friends throughout college who got into libertarianism, socialism, Ayn Rand, various new age beliefs, various intense hobbies, and various traditional religions. I'm sure the same could be said of everyone who

went to college, and moreover I'm sure you would include my own involvement in whatever you'd call this "movement" in my previous list. But, you never see Objectivists, Iron Man athletes, or chiropractors blowing things up.

Or, do you ... is our "movement" just counting the hits and ignoring the misses? If not, aren't you ignoring an extraordinarily serious difference between religion (or at least some religions) and other worldviews that aimless young men gravitate towards? I can't possibly be the first person to ask you this question, and I'm sure your reply is recorded somewhere, but I wonder if you'd mind answering here for us.

Posted on Sep 02, 2011 at 6:52am by [cheglabratjoe](#)

[Comment #20](#)

Science is the only effective means I'm aware of for seeing beneath phenomenal reality and beyond it, to "hidden springs and causes" of things. But that has nothing to do with persuading people to give up cherished beliefs.

Anarchists were mostly young people in transitional stages in their lives, often well educated and from middle class families, but also rich and poor families. nearly all were secular atheists. Their historical trajectory and impact is the closest thing there is, by far, to the jihadi movement. It's just as Malraux foresaw, counterculture ideologies would take on a religious color in the 21st century as secular ideologies played themselves out in the 20th century. the pendulum could well swing back in some decades, maybe the Earth Liberation Movement or some such.

Posted on Sep 02, 2011 at 10:10am by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #21](#)

Thanks for the reply!

Science is the only effective means I'm aware of for seeing beneath phenomenal reality and beyond it, to "hidden springs and causes" of things. But that has nothing to do with persuading people to give up cherished beliefs.

Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to hear you say this, but it doesn't entirely jibe with a few things I took away from your interview. Perhaps the problem is on my end, and I need to give it another listen.

Anarchists were mostly young people in transitional stages in their lives, often well educated and from middle class families, but also rich and poor families. nearly all were secular atheists. Their historical trajectory and impact is the closest thing there is, by far, to the jihadi movement. It's just as Malraux foresaw, counterculture ideologies would take on a religious color in the 21st century as secular ideologies played themselves out in the

20th century. the pendulum could well swing back in some decades, maybe the Earth Liberation Movement or some such.

Your anarchist example is interesting. But, I don't think it helps either of our points. If I'm saying (simplistically) that terrorism has something to do with religion, then yes anarchists are a counter-example. But, you still haven't supported your (simplified) point that jihad is just something that young people happen to get into. There's something about jihad and (apparently) anarchy that makes people violent, while adrift college kids who stumble into Mormonism or veganism don't get violent.

Are you perhaps saying that people with violent tendencies are going to latch onto whatever ideology is currently extreme enough to justify violence? Or am I going too far and putting words in your mouth?

Posted on Sep 02, 2011 at 5:49pm by [cheglabratjoe](#)

[Comment #22](#)

Atran makes a lot of sense. I remember back in the 60's the prediction that "people will not believe nothing. Deprive them of their current organized religion and they will believe anything." Coast to Coast has replaced The Revival Hour. Teams of ghost hunters have replaced Youth for Christ. Folk religion lives on and certainly none the better for the transformation.

For the left, politics has been forced to fill the roles of religion. Both can motive in a few people and justify in others, exceptional acts of charity or exceptional acts of malice, vandalism, callousness, and cruelty. Politics seems conspicuously more effective in the latter than the former, in contrast to the Christian religion anyhow. Islam seems to stand in unfavorable contrast to Christianity and numerous other religions that way too.

Atheism is usually prostituted for liberalism even more than religions are prostituted for political, evil or self serving ends. That is just one of those roles I mentioned.

I find arguing with liberals is strikingly parallel to arguing with Creationists. First come the talking points, clichés, and hackneyed factoids. When I'm not snowed or willing to let it drop there or when they hear something they aren't prepared for, the attack immediately turns personal. It is their identity, their foundation for feeling virtuous and superior that is at stake. The role of snobbery in liberalism and politically compromised atheism is overwhelming.

I would remind Nicolas that "minorities" are politically defined and it is a moral or quasi-religious decision that it is good to make them as opposed to majorities happy as it is to favor women over men or homosexuals over normal or other sexually deviant people.

Posted on Sep 03, 2011 at 7:00am by [rg21](#)

[Comment #23](#)

If I am wrong about Atran's affinity for logical positivism, then I regret saying so. I got the idea from several footnotes in his "In Gods We Trust," where he presented several arguments against religious beliefs grounded in logical positivism (i.e category mistake).

I stil do not know how people think Atran is a post-modernist. As far as I can tell, it is some kind of bogey man for skeptics. What am I missing here?

Posted on Sep 04, 2011 at 11:21am by [hardindr](#)

[Comment #24](#)

I am a regular listener to the podcast but haven't commented on an any episode yet. This episode led to especially interesting insights so I wanted to thank Scott for sharing these ideas and Chris for a great interview.

The surprising facts presented during the interview convinced me in the important role sacred values play in our societies, but I disagree with the specific example about Netanyahu's demand of the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state. As an Israeli citizen I am very familiar with this demand and I'd like to propose an alternative perspective - it's far from being transcendental - it means a de facto waiver of the Palestinians' right of return. Both sides acknowledge this so the term "recognize Israel as a Jewish state" remains a politically correct term for convention.

Posted on Sep 05, 2011 at 1:23pm by [shlomix](#)

[Comment #25](#)

I'd encourage anyone who might want to get a slightly better sense of where Mr. Atran is coming from to read [this discussion on edge.org](#).

For my part, I hope to get back here soon to ask a few other questions and add a couple of points.

For now, just a couple of quick thoughts.

Would it be any surprise that many suicide bombers come from the ranks of "petty criminals?" How valuable is that bit of data? There are petty criminals all over the world. What distinguishes the young people who blow themselves up in the middle east from petty criminals in, say, Bangkok or Sao Paulo? Might the more salient point have something to do with the fact that the former view themselves as "martyrs" for a deity?

And yes, the anarchists of the early twentieth century, like many communists later, perpetrated terrible acts of violence. As several of the "new atheists" who seem to be Mr. Atran's chosen foes have pointed out, the problem in both of those cases were more their *similarities* to religions and the religiously devout rather than their

differences. Could it not be said that the communists under Stalin, if not the anarchists (and today's American Tea Party) had "sacred values?" Isn't the problem with each a lack of underlying evidence supporting those values?

If so, why then should respect be accorded to similar "sacred values?"

If I recall correctly, anarchists (probably) tried to blow up part of lower Manhattan in the early twentieth century. Does that fact in any way excuse or explain away the motivations of the people who gave us the sad anniversary coming up this Sunday, 9/11/11?

When the Taliban blew up the Buddhas of Bamiyan, they didn't do so for the interests of petty crime or for anarchist ideology, did they? Their motivations were rather more specific to a particular set of unjustifiable and harmful beliefs, were they not?

Posted on Sep 08, 2011 at 5:58am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #26](#)

I'd encourage anyone who might want to get a slightly better sense of where Mr. Atran is coming from to read [this discussion on edge.org](#).

Anyone who is truly interested in this topic should read Scott Atran's book, [Talking to the Enemy](#). It is quite evident Scott Atran is not playing some kind of *armchair sociology* as he has the data to back up his arguments. Until you read the book, you are just wasting your and Scott Atran's time.

Posted on Sep 08, 2011 at 7:35am by [George](#)

[Comment #27](#)

Yes, of course.

Mustn't ask critical questions until we've all read the book.

Nothing short of that will do.

Otherwise, and even perhaps then, comments and queries (other than George's), including from the edge.org writers, are but piffle from *armchair sociologists*.

Posted on Sep 08, 2011 at 8:08am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #28](#)

Well, Brad, take your comment about Islam and jihad, for example. If you read Atran's book, you would learn that a mere one percent of madrasas support jihad, IIRC. (I see you have now edited your previous comment and taken out the part where you were playing armchair sociology regarding jihad. 🤔)

Posted on Sep 08, 2011 at 8:42am by [George](#)

[Comment #29](#)

Well, George, I edited a couple of my posts here prior to your posts or those of anyone else in efforts to make them better. If you still have a record through alert emails of anything I had edited out that contained “armchair sociology” or was false, please paste it in here and I’ll respond forthrightly and own up to any mistake, whether previously deleted or not.

Your point is taken that by reading one or more of Mr. Atran’s books, anyone’s understanding of his work and of his point of view would be increased and discussion with him and/or about his conclusions could take place on a more sophisticated level. Of course that would be the case. And I *would* like to find time to read more of Mr. Atran’s work.

At the same time, do you really think any commenter here needs your appeal to authority or ad hominem dismissals about “armchair sociology” just because you admire Mr. Atran and apparently agree with his conclusions?

For the record, as I posted also above, it seems to me that Mr. Atran’s work is vital and at least some of his views and conclusions are correct and very important. I agree entirely with him that argumentation and appeals to the wonders of science *alone* will never make a dent in the irrationality that drives beliefs in gods and in divine scripture. I agree with him also that much of the response, especially by the U.S., after 9/11 was wrongheaded.

However, I’m not sure I share Mr. Atran’s value judgement contained in the term “hysterical” that he used repeatedly in the podcast. I was in Manhattan on 9/11 and thereafter, lost friends and colleagues, and had my work life permanently altered for the worse that day. And that’s just me, not to mention millions of other people who were very literally attacked that day and had their lives and their families permanently diminished, nor to mention the existential and unpredictable nature of the threats to Western nations made real by both WTC bombings as well as those in London and Madrid. It’s only been recently that I’ve stopped being able to recreate in my mind the burning smell that I knew contained the incinerated remains of people, including friends and colleagues. So, “hysterical?” Perhaps Mr. Atran’s perspective might not take all the relevant factors into account?

In any event, while Mr. Atran’s research and data and some of his conclusions may be faultless, some of his other viewpoints and conclusions seem to me to be mistaken, and egregiously so. It is these I’m trying to understand, knowing all the while that it may be *my* understanding that is in error. That is why I’ve asked the probing questions.

For example, consider [the case of Richard Reid](#), whose bombing attempt Mr. Atran did not mention in his dismissive account of “failed” post 9/11 terrorist activities. (I used the quotation marks in the

previous sentence because,

- 1) it was only a certain amount of luck and the severe intervention of passengers and crew that prevented the aircraft from being destroyed in flight, and
- 2) ever since his attempt, every day millions of airline passengers have to remove and replace their shoes in order to pass through airline security in honor of Mr. Reid and his methodology.)

Reid was certainly a petty criminal and an utter nitwit. But so what? Given what is known about Reid, and what he himself said in his trial and sentencing, how can anyone conclude that his religious indoctrination and beliefs were not the proximate cause of his actions? If Mr. Atran's book explains that, then I'll really look forward to reading it.

But neither Mr. Atran's POI interview nor anything else I've read of him so far refutes a conclusion that Reid acts were primarily religiously motivated.

In the edge.org piece I linked for the use of any other readers here, Mr. Atran wrote of one of his colleagues, "Jeremy Ginges, a psychologist at the New School, finds that belief in God does not promote violence, combative martyrdom or almost anything else the "God delusion" was blamed for at the conference." Well, it seems to me that Mr. Reid - and Mr. Atta and colleagues on 9/11 - might not entirely agree with the conclusions of either Mr. Ginges or Mr. Atran.

And now that I think of it, I'd bet that the little girl who was beaten to death as [described in this report](#), were she alive today, might not agree either.

How many other of countless examples, though not contained in the data of Mr. Atran, do you think should be required before one has the standing to question his conclusions prior to reading his books,

George? 🤔

Also in the edge piece, Mr. Atran allows the following:

...religious beliefs are not false in the usual sense of failing to meet certain truth conditions, like "the earth is flat" or "natural grass is orange." Rather, core religious beliefs, like poetic metaphors, are literally senseless in that they altogether lack truth conditions; that is, there are no logical or empirical criteria for judging whether such utterances are true or not.

Now, I'm no sociologist, but apparently unlike Mr. Atran I've lived my entire life among devoutly religious people, and I don't know a single one who would agree with those statements.

AT ALL. NOT ONE.

I do, however, know *lots* of devout believers who would feel absolutely no responsibility to report their true views to a foreign infidel doing a "social science" survey. It may well be that Mr. Atran's research is so clever and well-done as to get around that. Maybe his books explain how...

Still, the statements I've quoted here and several other things Mr. Atran wrote in the edge piece make me particularly skeptical of Mr. Atran's conclusions and make me also less motivated to take the time to read his books.

Posted on Sep 09, 2011 at 3:27am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #30](#)

My claim that religious statements are not truth valuable in the sense that logical or empirical propositions are is, in fact a claim that logical positivists like Freddie Ayer, Ernst Nagel, Rudolph Carnap and other have long held. But now a number of researchers (myself, Ara Norenzayan, Pascal Boyer, Dan Sperber, Justin Barrett, Harvey Whitehouse, Robert McCauley, E. Thomas Lawson, and dozens of authors) have shown this to be experimentally the case again, and again, and again (in journals such as Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Nature, Cognition, Cognitive Science, Journal of Cognition and Culture, Evolutionary Psychology, etc.). It matters little what someone's intuition about this is. If science had to rely on intuition we'd be back, if not in the caves, at least in the time of witches and demons. As Hobbes noted (and Galileo and Aristotle before him) how can one possibly even make sense of "He is one in three" or of a non-sentient being that sees, hears, and smells all, or of even life after death? The way you do it is give it a particular propositional interpretation in a particular context (which is why there are weekly sermons, and also why religious quasi-propositions - which have the syntactic form of a proposition but which are semantically senseless, like colorless green ideas that sleep furiously - survive over centuries when contexts change).

As for people killing out of religious motivation, it happens all the time, just as doing good out of religious motivation happens all the time. Sometimes people do very bad or very good things in a religious cause. But I know of no empirical study or set of evidence that has a scientific control (say of non-religious ideologies) that shows religion is a greater cause of violence than non-religious ideologies.

Posted on Sep 09, 2011 at 12:36pm by [Scott Atran](#)

[Comment #31](#)

Mr. Atran,

It's unfortunate that the very limited context of this internet discussion makes any of us appear to be at loggerheads in a general way, because I'd bet that in broader terms we're all very much on the same page of wanting to obtain the greatest breadth and depth of factual data possible regarding terrorism (and other matters, too) and "armed" accordingly, to help bring about responses that will produce the greatest peace and harmony for humankind going forward. Toward that end, let me say again that your work sounds not just fascinating, but really important.

It's for those very reasons, though, that I think it's important for us to

question your arguments where they don't appear to make complete sense or where we can't comprehend them, so that we might all discover where any discrepancy may lie. After all, if your rationale isn't clear in friendly confines like CFI or a gathering of intellectuals, you might have even more difficulty getting your points across the next time you testify before our esteemed Congress, no?

Regarding the truth claims of religion, no doubt you and all the other philosophers and researchers you cite are entirely correct in the sense that you've described.

Certainly nobody here (barring a surprise entry!) is going to argue with you that a great many religious propositions can't make sense to any thinking person without the sorts of distorting manipulations you mention. No need even getting started on that...

But it seems to me the relevant question is not what we, or philosophers ancient or modern, think about the truth claims of religion, but what devoutly religious people think, and how *their* thinking drives *their* behavior for good or ill.

What percentage of devout god believers around the world would you say share the view you espouse? If we can't say that at least a majority of devout believers share your viewpoint on religious truth claims, I'm afraid I haven't been able to discern your point, either here or in the context of the edge conference.

Pardon me if it's obvious and I'm just too dense to get it.

Even more specifically with respect to the subject matter underlying the POI interview, that of terrorism, its causes and probability of recurrence, how many of the people we think of as terrorists might agree with your views on religious truth claims?

Can you name any known terrorists who view the truth claims/statements of religion as you suggest?

As for people killing out of religious motivation, it happens all the time, just as doing good out of religious motivation happens all the time. Sometimes people do very bad or very good things in a religious cause. But I know of no empirical study or set of evidence that has a scientific control (say of non-religious ideologies) that shows religion is a greater cause of violence than non-religious ideologies.

How would such a study be completed beyond a study of history, comparison of available weaponry, etc.?

In any event, I've heard this assertion many, many, times, although you're the first secular person I've ever heard make the point in exactly this way.

And what is the point? Let's say that secular ideologies are an equivalent cause or an even greater cause of violence than religious ideologies. Would that fact excuse or justify in any way the harms done by the religious ideologies?

And today, in the 21st century, in the immediate future would you say that the greater threat arises from religious motivations and ideologies or from any widespread secular ideology that you can name?

Posted on Sep 10, 2011 at 4:24am by [Trail Rider](#)

[Comment #32](#)

Yesterday as I was grooming my ancient cat, the History Channel had a program on "HELL" and a preacher "Baptist, I think" was mesmerizing his congregation on the truth that hell is just below the ground they were standing on. Sitting in front of him were children and elder people who should have known better. He ranted on that even the good people sitting in front of him would not escape hell until they took Jesus Christ as their savior. The children looked strange.....

My only hope for these kids is that they will be introduced to science before they are swallowed up by the most dangerous lie ever told in any building. The Preacher who I whispered to my cat, was a dangerous fat ignorant bastard. My cat understood. Hell, she's 21 years old and has been on my lap through many experiences including 911 and is used to my comments of disgust. I can't even discuss President Bush 43 without raising my voice in horror! I am a tad more in control when watching a football game...but not much!

The History channel did show the moving parts of earth and how the movements trigger earthquakes and some volcanic action. The preacher never mentioned this at all. The preacher told his group that God could swallow them up in a second and they had better do something before they left the church. Many sat there nodding in agreement. This is the same crap that I sat through when I attended a Revival meeting in Lake Havasu City just after 9/11. Hearing the hatred from the Christians made me understand the Islamic Terrorists coming after the USA.

I wanted my kids to learn the story of Jesus Christ but never the horror that God would strike them dead at any minute. 6 years was enough of that crap and they ended up in a secular college prep that was heavy on math and science. From there, I went to the USA - Utah football game and calmed down. Oh Hell it was a game between the Baptist USC and the Mormon Utah. USA won and being the school of my parents, I cheered. The cat slept all the way through it.

Posted on Sep 11, 2011 at 7:33am by [Sandy Price](#)

[Comment #33](#)

Chris, your very last comment in the interview was brilliant: "So a science that will persuade - without using science - is what we need to achieve". I can only think Atran will be losing sleep over this.

Posted on Sep 26, 2011 at 8:36am by [scarr66](#)

[Comment #34](#)

A central value to those of us who identify with the skeptical and atheist movement is continued examination of our core principles. No interview in recent memory has been more effective at getting me to do some of this than Chris Mooney's with Scott Atran. Thank you to you both and especial kudos to Atran for continuing the conversation here in this forum! (Sorry to be a little late the party, but I'm way backed up on my podcasts.)

What I found provocative was Atran's assertion that ALL of us, himself included, "buy into" (his words) some transcendental ideology that is immune from argument and evidence. Human rights and the principles of liberal Western democracies are just another instance of this. What some picked up on as "post-modern" was his unwillingness to let Mooney rope him into a defense of these values and the impression he gave that his preference for them is just an accident of circumstance.

So here is the challenge to all of us: do human rights and liberal democratic values really have no better foundation than the central myths of religions? (How about addressing this issue in future PoI podcasts with other guests?)

Mooney pressed him on whether there were "good" and "bad" religions and Atran said "yes," but was clearly uncomfortable here and retreated to "shifting sands" and a denial that any ideology will be found have a transcendental grounding. (A big "duh!" to this last point...this was the only place where the polished Atran seemed to stumble a bit over his words, the one question that required him to briefly step out of his "anthropologist persona").

Atran accuses the Gnu Atheists of arrogance. However, to me it seems the height of arrogance to assume that though a naturalistic worldview works just fine to protect you, Dr. Atran, and your academic colleagues from the "existential chasm" (or whatever you called it), it will never work for the great majority of people. Ayan Hirsi Ali and Julia Sweeney happen to be famous for their best selling media about their personal journeys from religion, but there are thousands more living in obscurity who have made similar ones. Is this not a trend that will make the world safer and more humane?

I didn't understand the point Atran wanted to make by mentioning Norway's response to the Breivik massacre. To me it's just an unsurprising example of an advanced Western secular society characterized by more compassion than most religious ones.

I also agree with some comments made above that Atran uses multiple definitions of religion. If all ideologies and "isms" are basically religions, then nearly all wars are religiously inspired. If, on the other hand, religion is categorically different from other kinds of ideologies, then its critics may be right to single it out, even if they overestimate the proportion of wars inspired by religions.

The caveats and concerns above notwithstanding, I learned a lot from this interview with Scott Atran and it still has me thinking. Please keep the guests coming that will challenge the received wisdom of us skeptico-atheists!

Posted on Oct 05, 2011 at 11:05am by [AL Horn](#)

[Comment #35](#)

Of course we are free from this horrifying illusion of hell and damnation. I didn't buy it as a child but I was fortunate in being raised by a Mormon family who never seemed to concentrate on anything other than breeding. I would snicker at the threats from many neighbors who were involved with Christianity as Pearl Harbor had just dropped into our brains making us wonder what the hell was that? No mention of God or even a Japanese God or any God but we didn't have a lot of time to discuss this stuff. My grandfather headed up Civil Defense in our area of California and we went to work gathering names and addresses of our neighbors and then weekly visits to the Vet's Hospital in West Los Angeles. My childhood disappeared under a ton of lists to be done just in Santa Monica.

As an observer at this point in time, I caught a taste of violent extremism from the John Birch Society who became the wandering Evangelicals from city to city. They talked in some kind of holy code and that only a very small group understood WW2. I got chased all over the Miramar Hotel by an Evangelical handsome man who wanted me to go with him to his room. I was about 16 and laughed at him. He was married with many children and it was the first true hypocrisy I saw. No! I did not go with him. It may have been what horrified me about these two-faced characters of the Fundamentalists.

I heard all the stories of hell and damnation but had read Orwell, and Wells and all the good juicy writers and took nothing seriously. I've been addicted to books my entire life and have developed calluses when it comes to Violent Extremism and Sacred Values.

The one thing that terrifies me is the new Republican Conservative movement into Evangelical Extremism. There are leaders in that group who have no knowledge of the basic books of the bible. 3 of the Candidates believe the 10 Commandments were written by Jesus. They don't know the difference between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These people are trying to scare the crap out of me!

I had a particularly offensive young woman on another forum tell me unless I accept Jesus that moment, I might not get to the end of the day. I did even after having an extremely painful shot in my spine. By the time I got out of there I was stoned to the gills and became fascinated by an electric meter in front of a Jewish deli and I wanted watch it for awhile. My daughter explained it was not art but an

electric meter and she took me home. I called her this morning to thank her for driving me to the doctor's office and asked her if we could go back to the deli so I could watch it again? Her answer was NO! I went to bed early and was annoyed that the Monday night football game was not on. It was Tuesday!

I am beyond Violent Extremism and Sacred Values but I am enjoying this thread....

Posted on Oct 05, 2011 at 12:37pm by [Sandy Price](#)

[Comment #36](#)