Negotiating the Sacred: Turning Impossible Divides into Opportunities for Peace

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Our world is replete with clashes over issues deemed sacred—yet how can we ever resolve such issues when they are deemed to be nonnegotiable? This paper highlights major obstacles to negotiating the sacred, including the illusory assumption that identity itself is nonnegotiable. Drawing on Relational Identity Theory, I present four major principles to overcome those obstacles and negotiate the sacred: (1) disentangle the sacred from the secular; (2) respect the other party's narrative on the sacred; (3) negotiate within their worldview; and (4) break down the sacred into solvable problems. In seemingly intractable conflicts over the sacred, the application of these principles can help parties reach a constructive agreement.

Keywords: Relational Identity Theory, negotiation, conflict resolution, relational identity, core identity, sacred, intractable conflict, identity theory

How should we resolve conflicts implicating our most revered values and beliefs—in short, how do we negotiate the sacred? A property dispute between two neighbors may get ugly but does not typically result in violence. Yet if those neighbors are ethnopolitical groups fighting over the boundary of sacred land, the entire calculus of the conflict changes. Neither side is prone to accede to the other's demands, and no legal decree is likely to stop either party from pursuing its objectives. To compromise on the sacred is to slice one's soul.

Conventional approaches to conflict resolution seem only to exacerbate disputes over the sacred. Should each party cling to a narrow position and argue its case vehemently —"God divined this land to us!"—the clash of perspectives is apt to escalate. Even if disputants seek to collaboratively problem solve their differences, they are *still* likely to reach impasse, because core beliefs cannot be negotiated like a commodity. We cannot trade 50 percent of our core convictions for 50 percent of theirs. When the sacred is at stake, rational trade-offs cower to moral principles that cannot be bartered.[1]

While conflicts over the sacred may feel nonnegotiable, they are not destined to fail. In this paper, I argue that negotiating the sacred *is* often feasible, and I elucidate theory and strategies to do so. I begin with a brief overview of *Relational Identity Theory*, an overarching model for understanding and addressing the identity-based dimensions of conflict resolution.[2] Expanding upon principles drawn from my research program and explicated in *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*,[3] I elucidate why conflicts over the sacred seem intractable and present general guidelines for addressing them.

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[1] J. Ginges, S. Atran, D. Medlin, and K. Shikaki, "Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 18 (2007): 7357–60.

[2] Daniel L. Shapiro, "Negotiating Emotions," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 20 (2002): 67–82; Daniel L. Shapiro, "Relational Identity Theory: A Systematic Approach for Transforming the Emotional Dimension of Conflict," *American Psychologist* 65 (2010): 634–45; Daniel L. Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

[3] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable.*

Theoretical Backdrop: Relational Identity Theory

Over the past twenty-five years, I have conducted practice-based research on conflict resolution, building empirically supported theories for bridging ethnopolitical divides and testing them out in the crucibles of real-world conflict in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Central Europe, and elsewhere. Through this work, I have observed a variety of psychological dynamics that affect conflict resolution and have developed Relational Identity Theory as a model for understanding and channeling these dimensions toward peaceful ends.[4]

Relational Identity Theory proposes that one of the most powerful emotional forces enflaming conflict is an *assault on the sacred*, an attack on that which we hold most meaningful in our lives.[5] When our beliefs and values feel threatened, strong defensive emotions result, and we tend to enter a divisive mindset I call the *tribes effect*.[6] In this mental state, we perceive disagreement as a battle to be won, believe legitimacy is on our side, and close our ears to the other's standpoint— resulting in a seemingly fatal chasm between our perspective and theirs.

To shed light on how we can negotiate such issues, Relational Identity Theory distinguishes between two types of identity. *Core identity* comprises the spectrum of characteristics that define who we are as a person or group, ranging from our spiritual, national, and ethnic affiliations to the rituals and beliefs we hold as most meaningful.[7] Because our core identity is fairly fixed, disagreement over sacred beliefs and values can easily turn into a zero-sum contest. If two religious groups clash over a public policy, neither is likely to cave in or convert to the other's belief system to resolve the conflict.

A second type of identity—*relational identity*—is much more fluid and opens possibilities for negotiation.[8] It encompasses the characteristics that define who we are in relation to a person or group and has two basic dimensions.[9] The first, *affiliation*, refers to our emotional connection to the other side: Do we feel close or distant, included or rejected? The moment parties experience an assault on the sacred, their affiliation typically turns adversarial. The second dimension is *autonomy*, the degree to which parties feel free to make decisions without undue imposition from others. An assault on the sacred imperils each side's sense of autonomy to believe what they want to believe and to act upon those convictions. Just as a physical assault is the forceful infliction of bodily harm, an assault on the sacred is the imposed rendering of spiritual harm.

Relational Identity Theory provides unique insights into conflict resolution that distinguish it from the heavily researched field of Social Identity Theory. The latter paradigm investigates how people partition the social world into ingroups and outgroups, form allegiance to the ingroup, and

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[4] Shapiro, "Negotiating Emotions"; Shapiro, "Relational Identity"; Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable.*
[5] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 98.
[6] Shapiro, "Relational Identity"; Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable.*
[7] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 15.
[8] Shapiro, "Relational Identity."
[9] Shapiro, "Negotiating Emotions."

enhance their esteem by comparing it favorably to the outgroup on a valued dimension.[10] While Social Identity Theory examines the process and impact of intergroup *division*, Relational Identity Theory illuminates the degree and quality of intergroup *association*, providing a roadmap for overcoming the dynamic, complex emotional blockades to interconnection and mutual engagement.[11]

Thus Relational Identity Theory is both a prescriptive as well as descriptive theory, highlighting a two-fold approach for resolving conflicts over the sacred: Parties can negotiate those aspects of core identity that are malleable while redefining their relational identity to support harmonious coexistence around those issues that are intractable. Doing so, however, requires an understanding of the unusual composition of the sacred itself.

Constituent Elements of the Sacred

I view the sacred as anything we perceive to be imbued with divine significance, ranging from a deity to a holy text, a cherished family relationship to a national flag.[12] We place the sacred in a separate category from the stuff of everyday life.[13] Rudolf Otto calls this altered reality *numinous consciousness,* a transcendent emotional experience that elicits in us fascination toward the sanctified object (*mysterium fascinans*) and deep fear of its awesome power (*mysterium tremendum*).[14]

Three properties of the sacred underlie its special authority over us and its unique role in creating deadlock.[15] First, the sacred holds *infinite significance*—its value is so expansive that it is nonquantifiable, producing exceptional dilemmas for conflict resolution. Consider the situation faced by Kenneth Feinberg, Special Master of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, in charge of making decisions on the financial settlement to each victim's family after the terrorist attacks against the United States. How should he quantify the value of a lost teenager, businessperson, or elder? What if the lost individual was *your* child? The closer the question comes to our own sacred world, the more we experience the quandary of quantifying the infinitely significant. Second, the sacred holds *intrinsic significance*—we view the object's worth as intrinsic to its constitution. Whereas beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, the devotee believes the value of the sacred lies within its nature, revealing itself to us and bringing meaning to our life.[16] Finally, the sacred holds *inviolable significance*—any offense against it can feel like an assault. Whether we burn a zealot's national flag or rip a piece of it, the impact will be similar: moral outrage.

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[10] John Dovidio, Samuel Gaertner, Ana Validzic, Kimberly Matoka, Brenda Johnson, and Stacy Frazier, "Extending the Benefits of Recategorization: Evaluations, Self-Disclosure, and Helping," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33 (1997): 401–20; Alex Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (London: Sage Publications, 2004); Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47; John Turner, Michael Hogg, Penelope Oakes, Stephen Reicher, and Margaret Wetherell, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

[11] Shapiro, "Relational Identity."

[12] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 98.

[13] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1912).

[14] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917).

[15] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 98.

[16] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harvest Book, 1959), 7.

Conflict over the sacred can seem intractable, for we cannot fathom compromising on issues of infinite, intrinsic, and inviolable significance. The dispute stands still much as it does in the classic Dr. Seuss tale of two furry animals—a North-Going Zax and a South-Going Zax—whose paths meet and who each refuse to step out of the other's way.[17] Years pass and highways are built around these animals, but neither yields to the other. They are frozen in time, much like conflict over the sacred.

Obstacles to Negotiating the Sacred

A variety of practical factors makes it difficult to negotiate sacred issues. The most fundamental reason is that we are unaware of what the other party holds as sacred and, as a result, say or do things that offend them and damage our affiliation with them. Years ago, I led a negotiation workshop for senior leadership in the Middle East. We were in the midst of lively discussion when, all of a sudden, the energy in the room tanked. I knew something was off. During the break, I learned that I had sat with my one leg crossed over the other, unintentionally displaying the bottom of my shoe to a participant to my right. This is taboo and, as it turned out, the sole of my shoe had been facing a member of my host country's royal family. A participant informed me of this prohibition and its cultural significance, and I immediately apologized to the offended person and then to the entire class, who fortunately had forgiving hearts for this inadvertent transgression.

In other circumstances, we know what the other deems sacred but fail to duly respect it. Imagine a real estate investor who wants to build a mall on land currently owned by a religious group. He extends a generous financial offer, but the congregation adamantly refuses because they know he will tear down their place of worship. Social psychologist Philip Tetlock calls this a taboo trade-off because it pits a secular value (money) against a sacred one (their temple).[18]

Another major stumbling block to negotiating the sacred is subtler: We attempt to persuade the other using arguments drawn from our own worldview. It is like a mother trying to persuade her teenage son not to drink alcohol because of the health ramifications when, from his standpoint, what matters is social inclusion. This mismatch in framing tends to produce unpersuasive arguments, for we all see the sacred through the lens of our own identity narrative.

In sum, an assault on the sacred can damage our affiliation with the other side and motivate us to erect self-defensive walls of protection around our autonomy, fueling the tribes effect and diminishing prospects for constructive conflict resolution.

Negotiating the Sacred: Key Principles

Several strategies are helpful to overcome the aforementioned obstacles.[19]

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[17] Seuss, Dr. *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961).

[18] Philip Tetlock, "Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7 (July 2003): 320–24.

[19] See Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, for additional perspective.

1. Disentangle the sacred from the secular.

Although the other side may declare an issue as sacred, that does not necessarily mean it is nonnegotiable. The sacred can refer to many constructs of varying personal importance,[20] and thus disputants should rigorously evaluate whether each issue under contention is:

- *important*: personally meaningful but negotiable;
- *quasi-sacred*: hallowed under certain circumstances;
- *sacred*: hallowed under all circumstances, but negotiable in extenuating situations; or
- *sacred-sacred*: nonnegotiable under all circumstances.

Only the fourth category—*sacred-sacred*—is unequivocally hallowed under all conditions, suggesting that not all sacred claims are in fact nonnegotiable. In the mall negotiation with the real estate investor, the religious group may see their property as *important* but not sacred, deciding to accept the lucrative deal to ensure their temple's fiscal stability. Should the worshipers see their property as *quasi-sacred*, they might view it as deeply meaningful but sell it to accommodate a larger congregation at a bigger temple on the other side of town.[21] If the property were *sacred*, it would hold intrinsic value but may be sold so that the proceeds could address a morally pressing need such as to promote wider social welfare.[22] The Singapore government used this approach to quell opposition to their acquiring religious centers for an urban renewal initiative—framing their actions as a sacred mission to serve the broader societal good.[23]

To help parties identify important facets of identity at stake in a conflict, I have developed the *BRAVE Framework*, a simple model consisting of five dimensions that form the acronym BRAVE.[24] Disputants can use this framework to evaluate how the other side's identity may be implicated in terms of their:

Beliefs—core cultural, spiritual, or social convictions;
Rituals—meaningful activities or spiritual practices;
Allegiances—loyalty to friends, family, and allies;
Values—deeply held ideals or principles; and
Emotionally meaningful experiences—deeply significant, defining experiences and memories.

But identity is more than just a set of boxes we tick off on a government form to define who we are. To unearth disputants' fundamental motivations, we must delve beneath their nominal

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[20] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 106.

[21] For information on the related concept of "pseudo-sacred," see Max Bazerman, Ann Tenbrunsel, and Kimberly Wade-Benzoni, "When 'Sacred' Issues are at Stake," *Negotiation Journal* 24 (2008): 113–17.

[22] For more on tragic trade-offs, see Philip Tetlock, Orie Kristel, Beth Elson, Melanie Green, and Jennifer Lerner, "The Psychology of the Unthinkable: Taboo Trade-Offs, Forbidden Base Rates, and Heretical Counterfactuals," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 785 (2000): 853–70.

[23] Lily Kong, "Negotiating Conceptions of 'Sacred Space': A Case Study of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 18 (1993): 342–58.

[24] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable*, 17.

markers of identity—such as the name of their religious affiliation and political party—to examine the personal significance of that membership. How is one's religious affiliation at stake *personally* in this conflict and why? What historical or familial experiences root each party to their belief system?

Awareness is a two-way street. While constructive conflict resolution requires us to comprehend the other's motivations, we also must understand our own. As Swiss psychiatrist Jung noted, "Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes." The BRAVE Framework can awaken us to our own deeper motivations. A religious group may fight for possession of sacred land, but its members may be rallying around this cause for a variety of reasons, ranging from allegiances to ancestry to a commitment to specific religious doctrines. The BRAVE framework calls attention to wide-ranging aspects of identity.

2. Respect their narrative on the sacred.

To successfully negotiate the sacred, parties must build a cooperative working relationship. Key to this process is *respect*. As parties feel respected for their narrative about the sacred, tension tends not to resolve but dissolve. Threat turns into support, and the door opens for joint problem-solving.[25]

Professor James Gilligan has found that disrespect is amongst the most significant predictors of violence.[26] In reflecting upon his extensive research on human interaction within prison systems, he notes, "I used to think that people committed armed robberies in order to get money . . . but when I actually sat down and spoke at length with men who had repeatedly committed such crimes, I would start to hear comments like 'I never got so much respect before in my life as I did when I pointed a gun at some dude's face.'"[27] When we feel disrespect, we are shaken by shame, humiliation, and a slew of other deeply unsettling emotions that motivate us to reclaim our dignity. The word "respect" literally means "to look again," and in a hostile conflict, we want to be viewed as worthy of a second look.

Respecting the other's narrative does not mean we are legitimizing it.[28] The aim is to understand and acknowledge the value the other side places on their narrative, not necessarily to agree with it. As they feel heard, understood, and valued for their perspective, they are less likely to resist collaborative problem-solving, even around issues previously viewed as nonnegotiable. In practice, expressing respect involves listening actively to the other's narrative and letting them know we understand the gravity and logic of their concerns. Rather than arguing the superior merit of our convictions or pointing out flaws in theirs—actions that predictably escalate conflict— we can acknowledge the moral and spiritual values driving their actions and help them appreciate the merit in ours.

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[25] Roger Fisher and Daniel L. Shapiro, *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as you Negotiate* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Evelyn Lindner, *Honor, Humiliation, and Terror* (Oregon: World Dignity University Press, 2017).
[26] James Gilligan, "Shame, Guilt, and Violence," *Social Research* 70 (2003): 1149–80.
[27] Ibid.
[28] On the distinction between appreciation and acquiescence, see Fisher and Shapiro, *Beyond Reason.*

We also can express respect through the shared experience of *reverence*.[29] Ironically, in a battle over the holy, our most fundamental commonality is the reverence we each hold toward something that transcends our mortal being. While each of us may worship a different higher power or view the sacred as important for a different reason, we can affiliate around this shared experience of *revering* the transcendent.

3. Negotiate within their worldview.

Because a single offensive word can instigate deadlock, productive dialogue requires us to speak the *language of the sacred*, using the right words and tone to convey respect for the other's narrative. But it also means that we paint the content of the conversation within their worldview. Rather than crafting rational arguments to convince them, we should concentrate on framing our message so the other party can best hear it, much as an emergency vehicle prints the word "ambulance" in reverse so that the driver ahead can easily read it in the rearview mirror. We want our counterpart to know that we understand their narrative and seek to bridge worldviews.

At a deeper level, speaking the language of the sacred requires us to shape our communication to resonate with the fundamental way the other side construes who they are— their *sphere of identity*.[30] Do they see their worldview as inherently fixed and immutable or fluid and malleable? Do they view their beliefs as sacred absolutes or ideological constructs open to transformation? By ascertaining the other's sphere of identity, we can better understand the lens through which they make sense of the world.

There are four basic spheres of identity—fundamentalist, constructivist, anattist, and quantumist—and each requires a different strategy for constructive negotiation.[31] The *fundamentalist* views identity as fixed, governed by forces outside one's control. In this mindset, the world is immutable and comprised of predefined values and beliefs that guide our lives and destiny. Thus, when negotiating with a fundamentalist, it can be useful to speak in terms of matter-of-fact beliefs about how the world works, drawing on their religious texts, scientific facts, or other relevant sources of absolutist knowledge.

The *constructivist* sees identity as a social creation, an ever-evolving concept with no predefined essence. Their values and beliefs are malleable, so if we build sufficient trust with them, they are likely to engage in joint brainstorming to find creative solutions to points of impasse.

The *anattist* views identity as having no essence. Self is an illusion, and humans are thoughts without a thinker. This transcendent conception of identity derives from the Buddhist notion of *anatta*, in which, according to Buddhist scripture, "form is not the self, sensations are not the self, perceptions are not the self, assemblages are not the self, consciousness is not the self." When negotiating with the anattist, it may be useful to frame conflict resolution as an opportunity to detach from current destructive impulses—away from the dualistic consciousness of the self in isolation from the world—and toward identification with and concern for the entirety of the world.

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[29] Shapiro, *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable,* 107.
[30] Ibid., 110.
[31] Ibid., 111.

By negating the distinction between self and not-self, this approach encourages transcendent unity and cooperation.

The *quantumist* understands identity as fixed and fluid, a synthesis of nature and nurture. He or she assumes that life is divinely granted (nature) but that decisions we make are of our own choosing (nurture). While negotiating with the quantumist, then, the challenge is to distinguish which of their beliefs are flexible and which are immutable, whether due to divine inspiration or biological destiny.

Problem solve from their point of view. Once we understand the other's sphere of identity, we can better frame our communications. For example, a few months back I spoke with a U.S. diplomat who works on Middle East relations. Steeped in Islamic scholarship, he shared with me how he had recently met with Taliban officials and successfully secured a deal favorable to U.S. interests. He said he had not made extreme demands of his Afghan counterparts but instead spoke with them about creative paths forward that aligned with Islamic principles. He had recognized the fundamentalist inclination of his counterparts and engaged in authentic dialogue framed within their own belief system. They responded enthusiastically to this approach and everyone efficiently came to agreement.

If we are unfamiliar with the other's worldview, we might enlist a colleague who has the relevant cultural knowledge to serve as an agent on our behalf. Sometimes, however, we have no such colleague and are not personally knowledgeable in the other's worldview. It is still good practice to attempt to speak the language of the sacred, such as by asking the other's advice: "Based on your religious beliefs and having some understanding of my own cultural views, what ideas do you have on how we might move forward?"

4. Break down the sacred into solvable problems.

A final approach to negotiating the sacred is to fractionate the conflict into bite-sized pieces,[32] turning the sacred into practical problems to be solved. For example, negotiating sovereignty of a holy land is a mammoth challenge that tends to polarize involved parties. But breaking the conflict into micro-issues can create room for creative options and mutual gains. For example, multistakeholder working groups can be established to invent creative solutions to address issues of security, health care, and other practical interests nested within the broader conflict over the sacred, and ideas that emerge can be shared with leaders as actionable possibilities for resolution.

No matter how hard parties may strive to reach agreement to resolve differences on sacred issues, however, there are times when each side simply wants the same land or object due to their own beliefs. In such situations, remember that sometimes *each party can get 100 percent of what they want at the same time*. Sharing is a powerful and oft-omitted form of conflict resolution. A disputed territory, for example, may be designated as owned by two separate countries who agree that there is no military, economic, or political activity without the consent of both governments. If sacred values prevent either party from sharing the land, they might define the terms of commitment

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[32] Roger Fisher, "Fractionating Conflict," *Daedalus* 93 (1964): 920–41.

based on what Henry Kissinger called *constructive ambiguity*, drawing on vague or imprecise wording that permits each side to interpret the pact in accord with their own worldview.

Summary

Negotiating the sacred is extremely delicate and complex, for it implicates our deepest convictions about the world and our place in it. Should others assault what we hold as sacred, they disrespect our identity and what we stand for. Yet negotiating the sacred *is* possible. Several strategies for doing so include disentangling the sacred from the secular, respecting each side's sacred narrative, negotiating within the other's worldview, and breaking down sacred issues into solvable problems. Ultimately, negotiating the sacred entails breaking free of the tribal mindset that polarizes parties and shifting to a communal outlook from which to problem solve our deepest divides.

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