Searching for the Link between Religion and Violence by Means of the Thomas-Theorem*

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Abstract

Current religious violence is a challenge to students of religions. Do we need categories like "cult," "fundamentalism," or "terrorism" in order to distinguish it from allegedly "genuine" and peaceful religion? Do monotheistic religions—with their exclusive claims to truth—necessarily generate intolerance? Sociologists have demonstrated conclusively that every action is based on a definition of the situation. Social actors do not put a norm or a model into practice independent of the immediate context of action. I argue that this holds true for religious actors as well. It is not the personal motive of actors, but the religious meanings they attribute to a conflict of their faith community, which is crucial for understanding religious violence.

There were decades in which scholars of religion were able to determine themselves the agenda of their scholarly work. But at present the situation is different. Politicians, journalists, movie directors, TV anchormen, writers and many others entertain a public discourse on religious issues that surprises and irritates the academy. How to react? There are colleagues who emphasize that these people speak about religion in inappropriate terms. When they suspect religion as being a source of violence, scholars should not regard this common parlance as a serious subject of study. The public debate cannot become point of departure, since its concepts are distorted and inadequate.

It is not the first time that this point of view has come up. Catherine Bell years ago made a similar point with regard to the notion of ritual, but she reached a different conclusion: "To try to discard the term ritual just when scholars have been successful in popularizing its use would imply a desire for esoteric categories accessible only to cognoscenti" (Bell 1992: 6-7). The issue

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* Translated From the German By Brian McNeil.

of "religious violence" is similar. We should not try to ignore the public talk, but to clarify it. A powerful voice in this regard was Jonathan Z. Smith. Four years after the frightening events of Jonestown 1978 he wrote: "If we continue, as a profession, to leave it [Jonestown] ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy" (Smith 1982: 104).

If we look at our own time, the task has become still more urgent and more difficult. In particular we should be cautious regarding attempts to bypass the issue by notions such as cult, fundamentalism, terrorism—forged with the aim to rescue "genuine religion" from the blame of violence. We are told that religion in itself is peaceful; only when manipulated can it turn into a source of violence. My paper begins with the opposite assumption. It takes widespread public opinion seriously, and presumes that there is a link between religion and violence. But it argues that it is not the existence of that link, but the type of it, that is at stake. This approach moves the analytical focus from religious worldviews and practical paradigms to the meaning attributed by believers to a violent act.

At this point in my argument an obvious objection might be raised: understanding religious perpetrators implies exonerating them. That could be the case, if understanding is based on empathy and sympathy. Imagine somebody kills a doctor who practices abortion. If a study reveals that the perpetrator belongs to a Christian fundamentalist community and that this community regards abortion as murder, the subjective meaning of the action is sufficiently recovered. An understanding of that act does not require empathy or sympathy from the side of the scholar. This would be misleading, since a religious community has more than one practical paradigm at its disposal when confronted with a practice that it regards as evil. It is the task of the scholar to break the spell of any necessity and to dissect the various components of the act in terms of available options. Here the issue of causality is at stake. The concept of causality introduces necessity again into the analysis. My counter argument is that the link between worldviews and practical paradigms allowing for violence ("abortion is murder") and the deed ("the perpetrator must be brought to justice") is mediated by the actors' definition of the situation and their choices in framing it. There are in the tradition of any religion too many models to lend validity only to one; validation of a transmitted pattern is a subjective act. Believers frame their situation by selecting a specific worldview or paradigm. Therefore, their action is most often disputed in their community.

So what makes the practice of defining a violent situation a *religious* one? The answer must be sought inside the religious community. Only when members of a community acknowledge the framing of their situation and the violent practice as in agreement with their worldviews and paradigms do they render an individual crime a religious act. But that recognition does not go

undisputed. Take suicide bombings, for example. The obvious fact that killing oneself in a military operation is seen by some in the Muslim community as suicide and by others as martyrdom is typical of religious violence. No religious community would survive if its beliefs and ethics undermine the existence of a civil order; but it neither could survive if it had no values and paradigms that require the defense of its existence when threatened by enemies from inside or outside. The analysis of religious violence in terms of a theory of social action moves the focus from the individual perpetrator to the religious community and its situation.

What Connects Monotheism and Violence?

There can be no doubt that religions have a potential for violence; and this observation is not new. When Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) contemplated the violence inflicted by faith communities in the age of the European religious wars, he sought the solution in a strong state. As the highest authority on earth, the sovereign must control the religious communities and keep them together with the theologians and clergy in check. In the twentieth century, Carl Schmitt drew the further conclusion that it was the task of the modern state to neutralize the yearning of the religions for salvation. Hans Blumenberg gave this idea a new twist with the assertion that the legitimacy of the secular modern age consists precisely in this task.

There is a completely different view, however, that was present even during Hobbes' lifetime. In his book on natural law, which was read throughout Europe, Samuel Pufendorf maintained "that religion is the most important and most solid bond of human society." Without religion, the states would lose their "inner solidity," and the citizens would have no conscience (Pufendorf 1994: 56-58, my translation). Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) discovered this book and extended its thesis. In order to recognize his duties, a human being needs neither philosophers nor theologians. The study of the sacred writings that contain the revelations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam brings no relevant knowledge. It is not the judgments of one's reason, but of one's heart that are the best teacher. While Hobbes had considerable reservations about the individual conscience on political grounds, Rousseau regarded it an infallible authority which prescribes the maxims of societal behavior in a reliable and obligatory manner. But what is in fact correct? Is the social bond, where it is based on religion, something bad, something dangerous to society? Or is it something good, something socially productive?

As long as one could assume that in the modern nation-state religions were a matter for the individual, this problem lacked all urgency. One example here

is the celebrated sociologist of religion, Peter L. Berger. In 1967 Berger predicted that religions in the modern world would retreat into the private sphere, and that they would continue to exist in the public sphere only in the form of political rhetoric (Berger 1967: 134). This may be how things looked for a time: communal religion may have seemed to be the loser in the modern age. But a different verdict is required today. A continuous growth on the part of religious communities in the USA and an almost break-neck speed in the expansion of Protestant communities worldwide bear witness to the new situation—as does the wave of foundations of new mosque communities in Europe, the Middle East, and the US.

It was Jan Assmann, a scholar of ancient religions, who identified a close connection between monotheism and violence. He interpreted the remarkable link between the biblical Moses and Egypt as a faded reminiscence of a reform by Pharaoh Akhenaten, who wanted to replace the many Egyptian deities with the one sun god Re (Assmann 1998). The attempt to impose an exclusive monotheism failed in Egypt, but succeeded later in Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods besides me" (Exodus 20:2-3). The "counter-religion" of Moses could only be the true worship of *one* God as opposed to the false worship of many deities. Even in Israel, it could not be enforced without violence. But Assmann does not regard the relevant biblical narratives as instances of violence that was inflicted *de facto*. They do not tell us how monotheism was in fact enforced, but how people remembered its ascension, Assmann argues (2003: 36). The language of violence that monotheism speaks is a "semantic paradigm" that has taken on a life of its own and does not *per se* generate violence (Assmann 2006: 21). When acts of violence are attested in Judaism, the victims are persons who have fallen away from the Jewish faith; violent activity directed at people outside Judaism arises only at a later date, and are the outcome of manipulation. The semantic dynamite that lies in the sacred texts of the monotheistic religions is kindled, not in the hands of the believers, but in the hands of the fundamentalists whose aim is to get political power and who make use of it in order to win over the masses to their side (Assmann 2006: 57).

Assmann's reconstruction has initiated a broad and lively discussion. Its great merit is that it takes seriously, both historically and systematically, the violent aspect of monotheism and offers an acute and precise reconstruction of a long tradition of violent religious language. However, one must ask whether Assmann does not define too narrowly the violence practiced in Jewish monotheism when he limits it to the case of apostasy.

Consider the violence practiced by the Jewish community against enemies who wanted to destroy it. After the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity in the fifth century BCE, for example, they received from the Persians the privilege of an autonomous legal community and were allowed to establish an association in Palestine which was administered according regulations derived from the social legislation of the Book of Deuteronomy (Nehemiah 10). This community added to Assmann's "Mosaic distinction" between the true God and the many false gods a societal differentiation between freedom and slavery. All members of the community were morally obliged to ensure that their fellows were protected from permanent enslavement (Kippenberg 1983). When the temple in Jerusalem was desecrated in the second century BCE by Hellenistic rulers in collusion with apostate Jews—those who sought to deprive the community of its sacred order—many Jews started resisting. When a fellow Jew was willing to offer a pagan sacrifice on the orders of a royal official, the priest Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees, slew both the apostate and the official. He cried out: "Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!" He then fled with his sons into the mountains, in order to organize the struggle against the apostates and the Hellenistic ruler (1 Maccabees 2:23-28; Schäfer 1983: 62-77). The Book of Daniel interpreted the dramatic events of the desecration and defiling of the sanctuary as a turning point in Israel's history and as the prelude to a new age of salvation. Those who died on behalf of the ancestral laws in the fight against the godless were regarded as martyrs who would be awakened to eternal life (Daniel 12:2; 2 Maccabees 7:9 and 14). From that time on, violence in defense of the Jewish faith community against its enemies was an exemplary act in religious terms (van Henten 1989).

We see therefore that monotheism had already placed a script for action into the hands of believing Jews in classical antiquity, justifying communal violence against pagans when the community was threatened. This occurred in the Maccabean revolt. Yet we see the very same Jewish rebels making a treaty of friendship with the pagan Roman senate when this political body granted the Jewish community independence and self-administration (1 Maccabees 8:23-28). Biblical justification for such a treaty was God's covenant with Noah and his descendants that included also pagan nations (Genesis 9:1-17; Schmidinger 2003: 23-26).

Other monotheistic instances of violence likewise argue against there being any *necessary* link between monotheism and violence. There *is* a link between them, but it is a remarkably contingent one (Makropoulos 2004). It depends on how believers define their situation. Monotheistic traditions are

misconceived when we read them as norms or values independent of the situation. In fact they are the instruments by which believers define the situation of their community and decide how to act (Joas 1996: 235).

From Jonestown to Waco and Beyond: Theorizing American Religious Violence

The first case that was coherently explained from this "situationalist" perspective was the murder and mass suicide committed by the North American "Peoples Temple" in 1978. An American community of young and old, men and women, poor and wealthy, and—most unusually—white and black, who had become disciples of the minister and healer Jim Jones, aspired to become a new kind of society, without discrimination against the old, women, or black people; and they rejected the sexual norms of bourgeois America. The public response to that challenge was often angry. Relatives blew the whistle against Jones and his "cult." Apostates fomented the rage. The media published reports about sinister practices inside the community. Citing stories of forced persuasion among American prisoners of war in Korea, parents commissioned psychologists to undo the "brain-washing" of their kids.

When Jim Jones failed to avert the newspapers' attacks through the courts, he migrated with his community to the small socialist country of Guyana in Central America. The practice of exodus or *hijra*—abandoning all relations of kinship and social obligations—is a well-known pattern in religious communities that reject the dominant culture. But even in Guyana they were not safe in their attempt to establish a counterculture. A delegation of concerned relatives showed up, led by a congressman, and exerted pressure on the community. When some members of Jonestown announced their desire to return to the United States, the future of the community was endangered. The tensions discharged in a bloody confrontation on the airfield. One hour later the "white night" began: the members of the community committed suicide by poison and killed each other by means of firearms—an act that was in line with Jones' conviction that believers should prefer a self-inflicted death to forced subjection under the destructive powers of this world.

The group's adversaries regarded the outcome as a confirmation of their misgivings. Jim Jones was a false prophet, and his persuasiveness depended upon force. For many years after the "white night," *Jonestown* was a codeword that stood for the all of the perceived social risks inherent in a "cult." Among the first to break that spell was Jonathan Z. Smith. When historians of religions continue to leave Jonestown un-understandable, he contended, they

surrender their right to the academy (Smith 1982: 104). Scholars responding to his appeal performed an unbiased investigation of the event, and ten years after the event published a reading of what had happened that contradicted the received wisdom. Consider the conclusion John Hall drew from his investigation:

> The key to understanding mass suicide at Jonestown lies in the recurrent dynamics of conflict between religious communities claiming autonomy and external political orders. In the general case a demand to submit to the external order forces a choice within the community between the sacred and evil. The choice brings religious conviction to a question of honor, and is the seedbed of martyrdom (Hall 1987: 296).

Rebecca Moore and Fielding McGehee III (1989) arrived at similar conclusions, as did David G. Bromley (1998). David Chidester (1998) has addressed the manner by which Jim Jones and his community were denied the status of authentic religion and examined how that "cognitive distancing" has happened. It was crucial that the Peoples Temple was classified as a "cult"—an American stereotype for exotic religions such as "Voodoo" that has been in use since the beginning of the twentieth century. Religions labeled as "cult" are turned into a mental disease; the believers deserve to be treated as mentally ill.

The concept of "cult" would determine the official attitude towards alternative religious groups at Waco, Texas in 1993 (Hall 2000; Newport 2006). A community of Adventists was suspected of illegal activities. When law enforcement agents made an unannounced inroad into the compound, the Adventists resisted violently. The FBI sealed off the community and ordered the followers by loudspeaker to leave the compound. When nobody came out, the agents assumed that they were being held against their will by their leader. After a standoff which lasted for weeks, the head of the team decided to launch a hostage rescue operation. The community defended itself, fire broke out, and by the end of the day seventy-four people had died.

In order to understand this course of events the Clinton administration commissioned an investigation. Reports for the Department of Justice were also prepared by scholars of religion. Lawrence Sullivan (1996) focused on the tacit assumptions underlying the operation. The people in charge were convinced that a genuine faith must be personal and internal; a conviction allowing for violent actions does not merit the designation *religion*. He judged: "Without taking into consideration the religious motives of the actors, the attitudes and actions of the participants are miscast in the terms of a 'hostage and rescue operation'" (1996: 227). The Adventists, on the other hand, understood the confrontation and the subsequent siege in terms of the Book of Revelation. When their leader started explaining verses of the book on the

phone, the agents dismissed it as "bible babble." Historians of religion from a nearby college, who knew this type of community very well, were not allowed to take part in the negotiations. Thus the people in charge remained unaware that they were behaving like the godless Babylon, and that their own actions corroborated the Adventists' belief that they lived in the age of increasing evil. Another report, by Nancy Ammerman, emphasized that the community's belief was similar to dozens of other Christian millenarian groups, and laid the blame for the violent outcome on the law enforcement officials who "fell victim to the images inherent in the label 'cult'" (1995: 285).

Both Sullivan and Ammerman provided ample evidence that the FBI missed the opportunity to integrate knowledge of religious communities into its interactions with the later perpetrators/victims. This conclusion was substantiated two years later, in 1995, when a similar situation arose again. The Freemen of Montana, a Christian group likewise claiming to live in the final age of history, refused to pay taxes to the wicked state. When their conflict with officials escalated, they found their belief confirmed: the government in Washington was indeed a satanic power, the "Babylon" discussed in the Book of Revelation. For months, the FBI laid siege to a ranch belonging to the group. But this time the FBI engaged religious experts who advised the FBI to abstain from any action that the Freeman could interpret as a confirmation of their own definition of the situation. Their conflict was brought to an end by negotiation (Wessinger 2000: 158-217). Two years later, representatives of the American Academy of Religion and members of the FBI's "Critical Incident Response Group" met for an exchange of ideas. At this meeting, according to a report by Catherine Wessinger, "the agents said they were receptive to using religious studies scholars as advisers and as 'worldview translators' in cases involving religious groups" (Wessinger 2000: 202).

There are lessons to learn from the American cases. Firstly, there is no causal and compelling relationship between religious belief and action, faith and practice. These cases confirm the hypothesis that beliefs are not activated independently of the situation. Whether a belief is put into practice or not depends on how the situation has been defined. According to this model of social action: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572; Esser 1999: 63). Secondly, external conditions do not dictate the manner in which a situation is defined. Rather, a situation must be "framed" by the actors. They choose from a variety of transmitted beliefs and practical models and select those which adequately interpret the conditions and provide guidance for action. The authority of a given tradition is not inherent. It derives from the process of defining the situation of their community.

Defining the Situation: Theorizing Religious Violence in the Middle East

These American cases provide an opening for understanding a shift in the Middle East conflict. The victory of Israel in the Six-Day-War created a situation that was defined in opposing terms. In modern international law, military occupation does not constitute a legitimate acquisition of territory. After Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in the Six-Day War, the UN Security Council demanded that all involved states in the region recognize one other and that Israel withdraw its troops from the occupied territories. But the (in)famous Resolution 242 was ambiguous. The English wording ran: "Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." In French it read: "*Retrait des forces armées israéliennes des territoires occupés lors du récent conflit*" (Withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied *during* or *since* the recent conflict). Is Israel required to return the entire territory? Or is there some latitude for negotiations?

The diplomatic ambiguity coincided with the emergence of a new religious movement within Israel. Religious Zionists interpreted the military occupation of biblical land as part of the messianic process. As the end of exile approaches, Israel begins to be restored in the promised land of Judea and Samaria. Following this definition of the situation, they established new settlements in Judea and Samaria. The Labor government was divided over this issue, while the Likud government that came to power in 1977 not only supported settlements, but planned and organized them itself (Gorenberg 2006). Regarding the possible annexation by Israel of the West Bank, Prime Minister Menachem Begin said: "You can annex foreign land. You cannot annex your own country" (Quigley 2006: 176). Judea and Samaria are parts of a unified Israel.

The unexpected and decisive Israeli victory in 1967 created a situation invited religious definitions. From its very beginning in the nineteenth century, the Zionist enterprise of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine had met with resistance from Orthodox Jews. Only the Messiah could put an end to exile and restore Israel to the Promised Land. Before that time Jews in Palestine are only allowed to study the Bible and to pray. A Jew who settles in Palestine and cultivates its soil betrays the covenant with God (Ravitzky 1996: 43-45). It was in the Orthodox camp that a new reading of secular Zionism was developed. At his Jeshiva, Rabbi Abraham Isaak Kook (1865-1935) taught an interpretation of Zionism that resembled Hegel's philosophy of history: the messianic process advances independently of the intentions of the Zionist settlers. His son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891-1982), who succeeded him, attracted great attention through a sermon he held shortly before the

Six-Day-War in 1967 (Aran 1997). All of a sudden during his speech he began to shout, rocked by grief. Nineteen years ago, he told his audience, when the news came that the United Nations had voted in favor of partitioning the land and created a Jewish state, the entire nation celebrated; but he sat alone and could not accept that the verse had been fulfilled: "They have divided my land." And he began roaring: "Where is our Hebron, where Shechem, where Jericho, where Anathoth? They are torn from Israel" (Gorenberg 2006: 21-23).

Three weeks later, Israel's troops redressed that state of affairs. No wonder Kook and his adherents saw the military success as a stage in the redemption of the Biblical Land of Israel. Students and rabbis from his school were prominent in organizing Jewish settlements in biblical places—against a hesitant Labor government. What they needed was the approval of the army, since the territories were under martial law. The "Bloc of the Faithful" (*Gush Emunim*) organized settlements but encountered increasing resistance on the part of Palestinians (Aran 1991). The intifada that erupted in December 1987 was preceded by slow but incremental intercommunal violence, as Ehud Sprinzak, professor of political science at the Hebrew University, reported in his study on the ascendance of Israel's radical right. Between 1981 and 1987, there were more than three thousand violent attacks on Jews, mostly by rock-throwing Arabs; the settlers retaliated with a growing number of violent acts. The intifada has done nothing more than increase the intensity of these clashes (Sprinzak 1991: 148). The religious settlers interpreted the Palestinian resistance as a new manifestation of an eternal hate of gentiles on the chosen nation.

In this situation tensions increased inside Israel too, in particular when peace negotiations were imminent (Sprinzak 1999). The settlers and the regional council of Rabbis of Judea and Samaria declared that returning already redeemed parts of the Biblical Land of Israel to the Palestinians would be apostasy. After the treaty of Oslo in 1993 the tensions discharged in acts of violence. In 1994 a Jewish settler named Dr. Baruch Goldstein carried out a massacre of Muslims praying in the Cave of Machpelah near Hebron, a tomb of Jewish patriarchs and sacred to all three Abrahamic religions. A commemorative volume celebrating "Baruch, the Man" was published the following year (Sprinzak 1999: 259-66). A tombstone was erected:

> Here lies the saint, Dr. Baruch Kappel Goldstein, blessed be the memory of the righteous and holy man, may the Lord avenge his blood, who devoted his soul to the Jews, Jewish religion and Jewish land. His hands are innocent and his heart is pure. He was killed as a martyr of God on the 14th of Adar, Purim, in the year 5754 (Source: http://www.fact-index.com/b/ba/baruch_goldstein.html, accessed February 14, 2010).

When, in 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin expressed readiness to negotiate over Biblical territories, the heads of the Rabbinical Council of Judea and Samaria discussed the Halakhic ruling that a Jew who betrays the community through acts that result in the loss of innocent lives may be killed without a trial (Sprinzak 1999: 254). In 1995 a student of the Bar Ilan University assassinated Prime Minster Rabin in accordance with that ruling.

The conflict between the state of Israel and the adjacent Arab states over the partition of Palestine, recognition of Israel, and the return of occupied territories has shifted over time to become a struggle between two communities claiming the same territory on specifically religious grounds. This shift created tensions and frictions within the Jewish community itself.

Something similar has occurred on the Palestinian side as well. The Palestinian Liberation Organization had been established in the 1960s on the model of the anti-colonial liberation movements and claimed to represent all Palestinians, Christians included. Its goal was an Arab state within the borders of the former British Mandate. But not all the relevant Palestinian groups joined the umbrella organization. The Muslim Brothers in Gaza did not regard the time as ripe for an armed struggle, saying that there first had to be a fight against destructive Western cultural influences and a re-Islamization of society and the individual; only at an advanced stage of this process could an armed struggle against Israel be waged. Under present conditions, *jihad* was put into practice by creating and running Islamic social institutions—mosques, schools, libraries, hospitals. This ethics of activist solidarity turned Islam—especially in Gaza—into a social power.

In the beginning Israel supported the Muslim Brothers as an apparently apolitical opponent to the PLO (Abu Amr 1994: 35-36). However, after the humiliation of the Six-Day War, the PLO lost some of its reputation inside Palestine. A younger generation was frustrated by the alternative of joining either a secular movement or an apolitical Islam. A third option emerged in 1987, when Palestinians started the uprising (*intifada*) and the head of the Muslim Brothers in Gaza decided to create a movement of their own: *Hamas*, an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement (*harakat al muqawama al-Islamiyya*), which literally means "zeal." In its very first communiqué Hamas gave the clashes with the Israel Defense Forces a distinct religious meaning. Those who were killed had:

> offered their lives in the path of God to uphold their nation's glory and honor, to restore our rights in our homeland, and to elevate God's banner in the land. This is a true expression of the spirit of sacrifice and redemption that characterizes our people.... A nation that welcomes death shall never die (Hroub 2000: 265).

In its Charter, published in August 1988, Hamas presented itself as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine (Article 2). Its goal was to raise the banner of God over every inch of Palestine (Article 6).

> Palestine is Islamic land that has been entrusted to generations of Muslims until the Day of Judgment. (Art. 11). Nationalism (*wataniya*)…is part and parcel of religious ideology (Art. 12). There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except though struggle (*jihad*) (Art. 13) (Hroub 2000: 273-275).

While Gush Emunim activated the concept of *eretz Yisrael* to claim the occupied territories for Jewish settlers, Hamas claimed them as Islamic *waqf*, as trust—a concept elaborated in the conflict with Jewish claims during the 1930's (Krämer 2002: 137).

In 1991 Hamas established a military wing, named after the martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassem. In the 1930s al-Qassem had argued that jihad against foreign occupation by British troops and Jewish settlers as a personal duty. The violence performed by the cells of this new brigade—often in the form of suicide attacks—was not independent of external conditions. The first campaign of attacks was triggered by the massacre committed by Dr. Baruch Goldstein in 1994; another one in 2000 by Ariel Sharon's claim of Israel's sovereignty over the Temple Mount—a place sacred to Muslims and administered by them. As Robert A. Pape (2005) has shown, suicide attacks in Palestine, Lebanon and elsewhere were practiced in organized campaigns and were triggered by acts of aggression and humiliation.

This strategic violence was informed by a religious understanding of history. After the defeat of 1967, apocalyptic thinking and writing enjoyed a revival among Sunnis in the Arabic world. It provided an explanation of how the small state of Israel could defeat the much bigger Arab armies and conquer Jerusalem and the West Bank. Here too, a messianic interpretation of the present situation provided the key. At the end of time, before the Mahdi arises, the Dajjal (a kind of Antichrist) seizes power, and rules over a world filled with injustice and tyranny—as is occurring now in Jerusalem. As David Cook points out in his study of contemporary Muslim apocalypticism, the Sunni authors of these writings knew and adopted parts of the Protestant pre-millennarian construction of the end of time. Jerusalem is the capital of the Antichrist before he comes to be defeated in battle at Armageddon, in northern Israel (Cook 2005: 184-200).

New Players in a Not-So-Old Game: American Protestants in the Middle East

Thus, both Jews and Palestinians defined the post-1967 situation in Palestine in religious terms and derived particular scripts of action. Instead of stating their claims in terms of a mutual recognition of states, both sides based them on religious grounds. It is crucial to note that these shifts were mirrored by changes in American policy as well.

While the Carter administration was convinced that any establishment of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories was inconsistent with international law, Ronald Reagan declared in an interview: "I disagreed when the previous administration referred to them [settlements] as illegal—they're not illegal" (New York *Times*, Feb. 3, 1981). He regarded the territories as *contested* rather than *occupied*; both the Palestinians and the Israelis had valid claims. This reorientation converged with a Protestant religious current in the United States that grew steadily throughout the twentieth century: pre-millennialism.

The Reagan Administration embraced the idea of a restoration of Israel in the Holy Land; the Islamic concept of the land as endowment of the Prophet, as *waqf*, provoked only irritated reactions. Yet, it is a mistake to see the preferential treatment given to Israel merely as the result of a well-funded and influential Jewish Lobby (Mearsheimer and Watt 2007). Rather, it is the fruit of one particular type of Protestantism which has become a "superpower" in the domestic politics of the United States. The Protestant commitment to a restoration of Israel was rooted in a specific eschatological scenario. American Protestants believed that the biblical promises to Israel had not been transferred to the people of the Christians (and thus to the church)—a widespread view in Christian theology—but still applied to the Jewish people. The process of the restoration of Israel had begun in keeping with the still open prophecies; we are now shortly before the start of the final millennium. Because of this eschatological conviction, which had been spreading in the USA since the nineteenth century, Protestants followed the political events surrounding the foundation of the state of Israel with breathless excitement. They expect that one of the next steps would be the re-establishing of the Jewish temple and some say openly that first, the Islamic *al-Aqsa* mosque must be destroyed.

In his fine book, *On the Road to Armageddon*, Timothy Weber describes the repercussions that Israel's occupation of biblical land had on these Christians: "For the first time, [they] believed that it was necessary to leave the bleachers and get onto the playing field to make sure the game ended according to the

divine script" (Weber 2004: 15). This view has become extraordinarily popular in the States thanks to a flood of books and DVDs—consider the *Left Behind* series (Forbes and Kilde 2004). Today, between forty and fifty million Americans sympathize with an eschatological scenario of this kind, and they constitute a powerful reservoir of voters who expect that history is advancing on the road to Armageddon and that the restitution of Israel is part of the final history of the world. Although they are convinced that at the end of time the Jews have to convert to Christianity or suffer final annihilation, close bonds exist between the movement of settlers and American Fundamentalists.

The transition to from a model of political conflict to religious war had a profound impact on concepts and definitions of the enemy. On June 8, 1977 it was agreed in an Additional Protocol (I) to the Geneva Convention that the rules of the Geneva Convention should apply to an instance that had not yet received consideration; namely to armed conflicts in which people fight against colonial rule, foreign determination, and racist regimes in the exercise of their right to self-determination, as this is laid down in the Charter of the United Nations. This meant that Palestinian resistance organizations too had a right to be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention—assuming that they themselves observed it. The new legal situation provoked vigorous counter-reactions in Israel and America. Two conferences were held in Jerusalem and Washington with the declared goal of mobilizing the West to fight against terrorism. The organizers—among them, Benjamin Netanyahu—emphatically rejected the "idea that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In reality, they insisted, terrorists intentionally and deliberately kill innocent persons. This meant that terrorism must be defined differently: "Terrorism is the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming, and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends" (Netanyahu 1986: 9).

George P. Schultz, American Secretary of State from 1983 to 1989, attended the second conference, and accepted the new definition established by the Additional Protocol. In his contribution, he wrote that if one grasped the meaning of this definition, it would not be difficult to distinguish between terrorists and freedom fighters. For example, the fighters in Afghanistan and the Contras in Nicaragua were not killing innocent persons: they were resistance fighters, not terrorists (Schultz 1986).

This notion of terrorism became a crucial element in the new scenario of violence. In 1983, the US State Department published an official diplomatic definition of terrorism: "The term 'terrorism' means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." This definition avoids considering the legitimacy of resistance against foreign occupation; it suspends the dialectics of "one person's terrorist is another's freedom

fighter" (Kennedy 1999). Instead, it sets up two opposing categories: genuine freedom fighters, which may be supported by the US, and inhumane terror organizations listed annually by the State Department and persecuted globally. While one might argue that all freedom fighters are both bad and good at the same time, this definition allocated them to one of two camps exclusive camps: adherents of civilization or manifestations of evil.

This split profoundly affected the rhetoric used. Speaking of "terrorists" erases any incentive to understand their point of view. It deflects attention away from policies that may have contributed to their grievances. It repudiates any calls to negotiate with them. Force and violence become the only proper means to deal with them because the terrorist now exists outside the international legal order. Simply put, terrorism is a *metaphysical* category (Kapitan 2003: 47-66).

Theorizing Religious Violence After "Terrorism"

In order to understand contemporary forms of religious violence without the metaphysical crutch of "terrorism," we must examine contemporary forms of religious community. Alongside the familiar social forms of synagogue, church, and mosque, networks (regional, national, and transnational) have come into existence, and constitute a modern social form of religion. Existing legal forms permit lay persons to establish religious associations independently of state privileges, but also independently of traditional religious authorities. In these networks, contemporary issues, urgent concerns, humiliating experiences, and intense expectations of the adherents of the religion are addressed and expressed and brought into relation with the views and practices of their faith. Such networks have spread above all in those parts of the world where the state is weak, does not exist at all or where state structures collapsed due to crises and wars. Here the people are becoming dependent on their religious community and its social capital. In addition the dynamics of a market economy leads to an individualization of the risks of life. Where neither state nor traditional loyalties are able to offer the individual security in situations of crisis and distress, fading social bonds of family, neighborhood, village, tribe, language and nation are absorbed or replaced by religious communities, fostering an ethics of solidarity. The believers, convinced that they are the core of the new divine order, are creating social enclaves with modern institutions as hospitals, schools, welfare, militias, that turn them independent of the wicked state. If this enclave is threatened in its existence the members develop the belief that it is of supreme value to fight for it.

It is unlikely that in the foreseeable future faith communities will give up their role as actors in civil society and withdraw from the fields of crisis and conflict. Nevertheless, it is wrong to assume that a definition of one's situation in terms of messianism or apocalypticism intensifies crises and conflicts, and is therefore necessarily a bad thing. American law enforcement involved in the Waco incident has learnt that one must understand how a defiant religious community interprets the situation and frames its practical response, in order to react properly and counteract the risk of unintended escalation. The terminology politicians apply to communities that are in conflict with state authorities or the legal system makes it seem absurd to negotiate a solution with them. The notions of *cults*, *fundamentalism*, or *terrorism* deny them any claim to genuine religion or justified resistance. They never can be partners to a treaty. This view has decidedly biblical roots:

> When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you…and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy (Deuteronomy 7:1-2)

The history of Judaism reminds us that this kind of violent language did not determine the practice of the believers. On the contrary, the history of Judaism is a telling example of how, despite such language, it was possible to make treaties with Gentiles.

The same holds true for modern religious communities. In Egypt after years of violent clashes the *Jamaca al-Islamiyya* revised its militant strategy and agreed with State officials on a truce; otherwise its bare existence was endangered (Fawzi and Lübben 2004). Even more so, a religious community responsible for social institutions must take into account the damaging consequences of unrestrained violence. This may be less true of a group of young men like the Hamburg cell, which rejects social Islam and is fiercely resolved to fight. But a religious community that supplies a social network for its members is inclined to privilege an ethics of responsibility over a martial ethics of commitment.

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