CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Violence as Communal Religious Action

The intellectual, political, and military response of Western countries to the attacks of September 11, 2001, displayed a helplessness that itself conjures up new dangers. Let me mention only one example. On September 15, 2001, the auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Hamburg, Hans-Jochen Jaschke, expressed his indignation that the group responsible for the attacks had invoked God: "Thereby they dishonor the holy name of God. They misuse it for their perverse state of mind. . . . We must not allow criminals to justify their actions in the name of God, to issue a summons to a holy war, and to promise a reward from God to those whom they have blinded. For God's sake, NO!" What we must do now, the title of Jaschke's newspaper article declares, is to *raise on high God's holy name*: "In view of 9/11, I believe that the emergency situation exists in which appropriate, limited, legitimized violence may be used. It can create the preconditions for a rational unity among human beings. A worldwide civilization of love is possible only when it is not threatened by terror."[1]

Today, we know that the military salvaging of God's honor did not create the preconditions for love, but merely added further impetus to the escalation of violence. It is therefore high time to examine the efficacy of the therapy applied and to offer a new diagnosis of the phenomenon of contemporary religious violence.

Ought We Seek to Understand Religious Violence?

Academic disciplines are kept on their toes by unexpected leaps on the part of the objects they investigate. Scholars of religion have been surprised in this way by occurrences of religious violence. In 1978, when the conflict between an American faith community and the U.S. authorities in Jonestown, Guyana, ended with the murder of an American congressman and members of his entourage and the subsequent mass suicide of the community, scholars of religion were confronted by a phenomenon for which they were not prepared—and this was only the beginning. Since then, religious violence has broken out in many different places in the world: other cult wars in the United States, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the civil war in Lebanon, the transformation of the Middle East conflict from one between states to one between faith communities, the attacks on the United States by jihadists on September 11, 2001, and the "War on Terror." All these are studied in the present book. One could easily extend the list of cases (to include, for instance, the Serb wars against Muslims in Bosnia and in Kosovo, the Hindu riot in Ayodhya that led to the destruction of the Babri Mosque, or the conflict in Chechnya). However, I limit myself to the eight cases mentioned here, because a close analysis of a few select instances increases our chances of developing an ideal model for other cases as well. This also makes it possible to look more precisely at each individual arena of violence, at the actors involved, and at the sequence of events.

This subject attracts considerable public interest, and rightly so. For a long time, religions were considered as guarantors of the legal order, but today they are under suspicion of promoting violence and posing a threat to law and order. This is the perspective guiding my inquiry into the individual cases, which are explored as actions rejecting the authority of states, including state sanctions against murder, kidnapping, bodily harm, rape, and crimes against property, in the name of a purported higher, revealed law. The appeal to a higher law thus seeks to legitimate actions that transgress national and international law. The focus of the investigation moves from the individual and rational motives of those who perpetrate violence to the meanings that they and others attach to their actions. This will give us a spectrum of religious views of history and models of action that justify the violation of laws.[2]

The subject is a delicate one. When religious violence manifested itself anew in the events in Jonestown, the American scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith was the first to recognize what a tremendous challenge this meant for the claim of religious studies to academic standing, declaring: "[I]f we continue, as a profession, to leave it ununderstandable, then we will have surrendered our rights to the academy."[3]

The link between religion and violence is so controversial because although the constitutions of the secularized states detach political power from religious legitimation, they also place the citizens' religion under their special protection. The two facts are logically and historically connected. At the same time as the first of the constitutions were written and gave legal guarantees of religious freedom at the close of the eighteenth century, philosophers were developing an understanding of religion that transposed its validity from external authorities to the subjective authority of citizens. Only an interiorized religion could achieve civil peace; the state and its means of coercion were incapable of doing this on their own. For such a position, religious violence is a dangerous contradiction: an action cannot be simultaneously religious *and* violent. Smith refers to this troublesome point when he writes that the academic study of religion, which arose in the nineteenth century, has helped domesticate religions and transmute them from a passion to a commitment. It was admitted to academia only because it succeeded in doing so. Today, in view of the panic public reaction to religious violence, this task presents itself anew, and no effort should be spared in the endeavor to understand this violence.

When we attempt to grasp religious violence as a comprehensible action, we risk offering an apologia for it. And Hezbollah's web site sufficiently testifies to the appropriation of academic elucidations of suicide attacks by perpetrators of violence. In order to counter this danger, I shall follow Max Weber in making a strict distinction between two views of what it means to "understand": that is, between the understanding of the motives of those who act and the understanding of the significance of their actions. If we want to understand the *motives of those who act,* the more plausible its motivations, the more comprehensible an action. If we want to understand the *significance of an action,* we must trace the model that orients it; we must then determine the spectrum of alternative models from which this orientation was selected; and we must consider the approval or rejection that is attributed to the model. In what follows, I shall take the second path and concentrate on the significance of acts of religious violence.

Disgust at every attempt to understand religious violence has become even greater after 9/11. Immediately after these events, the columnist Henryk Broder wrote in the German newsmagazine *Spiegel*: "Now all I am waiting for is for some noble soul to get up and say that the attacks in New York and Washington must be seen in connection with the struggle of the Third World against the First World. Shall we place bets that this will happen in the next few days, as soon as the smoke has settled over the ruins on Manhattan?" Broder formulated this question so polemically because he was convinced that: "A fight between the cultures is taking place. . . . What is involved here is a sheer delight in murdering, a delight that now does not even need an excuse."[4] With these words, he deliberately transposed the action into the realm of the incomprehensible and suggested that nothing could—or should—help to explain it. We find a similar line of argument in Wolfgang Sofsky, who had written in 1996 in his *Traktat über die Gewalt* that in seeking to interpret it as a means to an end, one completely misunderstands the character of violence. Sofsky now applied this thesis to the events of 9/11. The (alleged) lack of a letter in which the perpetrators claimed responsibility for their deed clearly meant that terrorism wanted more victims, not just more onlookers. "It was impossible to discern any political goal beyond the desire for destruction. The attack did not mean anything. It was an act of destruction without any ulterior purpose. . . . The terrorist's war . . . wants to kill a great number of people, to spread fear, to paralyze people's life through fear."[5]

Sofsky writes that religion played no role here beyond the "overcoming of the fear of death."[6] He calls the phenomenon of violence he distills in this way a "massacre"; it is impossible to explain it. He is no doubt correct in saying that the significance of violence in the modern era has generally been unrecognized, aside from Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908). Hans Joas, too, concludes that violence must not be seen *only* as a means to an end; but this does not mean that one cannot understand it. As a matter of fact, violence gives expression to experiences and meanings that are not generated by a purpose or a norm that is fixed in advance.[7] In this sense, its message belongs to the category of performative actions whose meaning lies in their reenactment of a celebrated model of conduct. Sofsky never even mentions this performative character, however, leading Bernd Weisbrod to accuse him of being a spokesman for an "aesthetic of horror."[8]

The frequently repeated assertion that there was no letter claiming responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, and that the perpetrators were intent only upon destruction, overlooks the videos they left behind, in which they claim responsibility for their actions. On April 15, 2002, al-Jazeera aired a documentary that it had allegedly received from a pro–al-Qaeda production company and that included a separate videotaped will and testament prepared by one of the 9/11 hijackers. A man identified as Ahmed Ibrahim al-Haznawi talks about his plans for attacks in the heartland of the United States. In his statement al-Haznawi said he would help send a "bloodied message" to the world: "The time of humiliation and subjugation is over. It's time to kill Americans in their heartland. O God, revive an entire nation by our deaths. O God, I sacrifice myself for your sake, accept me as a martyr."[9]

Besides this confession, the 9/11 perpetrators left behind a document that guided them in their actions.[10] The existence of this manual appears to justify experts on terrorism such as Peter Waldmann, who maintain that these attackers, like terrorists in general, "were not interested in the actual destructive effect of their actions. These were only a means, a kind of signal, in order to communicate something to a large number of people. We must affirm that terrorism is primarily a communication strategy."[11] Two separate strands in the attack can nevertheless be distinguished. On the one hand, it was planned long in advance and was the fruit of careful reflection. It was intended as vengeance on the United States for injustice that had been suffered. In this sense, it was a rational, intentional action. On the other hand, the attack was staged like a *ghazwa,* or early Islamic military raid, and in that sense, it proclaims itself a performative action that embodies its own meaning.[12]

The performative character of the action was exceedingly sinister in the eyes of the American public and government and gave it the character of something incomprehensible. The U.S. government believed that it could protect the country only by means of equally unconditional violence. In keeping with the exorbitance of the U.S. government's military counterviolence, the spiritual manual the FBI published in September 2001 played no role whatever in the pursuit of the perpetrators and is nowhere mentioned in the detailed report of the investigation of the events preceding 9/11 published by Congress and the president three years later. From the very outset, the countermeasures were not accompanied by any attempt to understand the actions of the perpetrators or to determine the appropriate reaction in accordance with this understanding. It was assumed that only an immeasurable hatred of America and American freedom could have motivated the perpetrators and their backers. They were thought capable of anything at all, and this meant that the military reaction must be as comprehensive and as powerful as possible.

Practices of Religious Violence

The problem of the religious practice of violence was raised in academic literature as early as the 1970s.[13] In 1972, the originals of both René Girard's study *Violence and the Sacred* and Walter Burkert's *Homo necans*—inquiring into the connection between violence and Greek religious ritual and myth—were published. In 1997, Burkert retrospectively observed that the evidence and the interpretations of the two books were partly comparable, since both attempted to uncover a hidden "crime" in existing institutions.[14] The two investigations' points of departure were also similar, namely, sacrificial rituals. In their daily lives, human beings are forbidden under pain of punishment to kill other human beings; but *for precisely this reason,* killing can become a holy act. Girard describes the circular relationship between holiness and violent action as follows: it is a crime to kill the victim, because it is sacred—but the victim would not be sacred if not killed.

The two authors offer different explanations of this link, however. Burkert argues that since aggression against an animal is a communal action, it is a prerogative of the collective and therefore "holy." Girard begins with the biblical account of the scapegoat. When the high priest lays all the guilt and transgressions of the people on a male goat on the Day of Atonement and sends it into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20–22), the destructive forces that have piled up in society are thereby discharged.[15] But whether this is understood as a communal triumph in the bold action of killing or as catharsis of an aggression through the vicarious victim, in each case, communality is constituted or renewed through the ritual of killing.[16]

Scholars who take this line tend to see religious violence as unavoidable and, in fact, as socially productive; but others take a different view. The suspicion that religion and destructive violence are closely linked goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when it was argued that the devastating wars of religion could be explained by the fact that a monotheism treating the worship of other gods as idolatry necessarily led to intolerance and promoted violence. Only an apolitical, inner religion would be immune to this. Since then, this assertion has run like a golden thread through the history of European thought. Even today, opinion polls in all European countries show that a majority of citizens (varying in proportion from one country to another) regard religion as a cause of conflicts and as intolerant, and wish that it had less influence.[17] In the wake of September 11, 2001, there was renewed suspicion that monotheistic religions cause violence.

How Intolerant Is Monotheism?

Jan Assmann, whose academic field is the history of ancient religion, has undertaken in several books to clarify the nexus between monotheism and violence.[18] He interprets the remarkable linkage between Moses and Egypt in the Bible as a faded memory of the reforms by Pharaoh Akhenaton in Egypt, who wanted to replace the many Egyptian deities by the one sun god Aten, or Ra, alone. Assmann draws a distinction between this exclusive monotheism, which denies the existence of other gods, and another type of belief in one God, which postulated a cosmic ordering as the location of all the gods and goddesses who were worshiped; he calls this "cosmotheism."[19] The attempt to replace the latter with an exclusive monotheism failed in Egypt and succeeded only in Israel where, according to Assmann, an open and tolerant belief in God gave way to an exclusive and intolerant belief in one God. Moses' "anti-religion" knew only the true veneration of the one God as opposed to the false veneration of the many: "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" (Exod. 20:2–3). In Israel, this belief was violently imposed. Assmann does not, however, see the biblical narratives of the Golden Calf, the sacrificial competition between Elijah and the priests of Baal, and the violent enforcement of Josiah's reforms as relevant, historically factual instances of violence. Instead, he proposes a "change of perspective in the memory of history," arguing these texts do not tell us how monotheism was enforced de facto, but how its enforcement was remembered.[20] The language of violence that monotheism speaks is a "semantic paradigm" that has taken on a life of its own, but it does not in the least engender violence.[21] Forms of divine worship perceived as false, such as heresy, paganism, idolatry, magic, and apostasy, were excluded only in a symbolic manner. Where violent acts are attested to in Judaism, they are internal, directed against apostates of one's own faith. The principal enemy is the apostate, not the foreign unbeliever, and the first object of religious violence is the apostate. Any violent activity going beyond this occurred only at a later date, and was manipulated: "The semantic dynamite contained in the sacred texts of the monotheistic religions is kindled not in the hands of the believers, but in those of the fundamentalists who want political power and who make use of religious motifs of violence in order to get the masses to support them."[22]

This reconstruction by Assmann has attracted considerable attention. It has the great merit of taking the violent side of Jewish/Christian/Islamic monotheism with renewed seriousness from a historical and a systematic perspective, and of reconstructing a long tradition of violent religious language with great diligence and accuracy. At the same time, however, one must ask critically whether in limiting monotheism's violent record to apostasy, Assmann does not offer too narrow a picture of it.

Blessing as Curse

Some biblical narratives of the promise of the land, which Regina M. Schwartz has investigated, indicate a further source of violence whose origin lies in a particularity of the Jewish faith in God.[23] Cain, the farmer, offered to the Lord a sacrifice of the fruits of the field, while his brother Abel, a shepherd, offered some of the firstborn of his sheep. The text tells us, without any precise explanation, that the Lord looked with pleasure on Abel and his animal sacrifice but rejected Cain and his plant sacrifice (Gen. 4:1–5). Cain is so enraged at this that he murders Abel. We read of a similar, no less impressive instance in the story of how Jacob obtained by trickery the blessing of his blind father, Isaac, by pretending to be Esau (Gen. 27:30–37):

> As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting. He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father, and he said to his father, "Let my father arise, and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me." His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am your son, your firstborn, Esau." Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and he shall be blessed." When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!" But he said, "Your brother came with guile, and he has taken away your blessing." . . . Then he said, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Isaac answered Esau, "Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers I have given to him for his servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?"

A similar scenario occurs when the promise is given that the people of Israel will occupy the territory in which the Canaanites dwell. The Israelites do not lay claim to the land because they were born in it, or because they have some kind of rights in it, but because God has promised that they will possess it: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you . . . greater and mightier than yourselves . . . , then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them" (Deut. 7:1–2). This narrative also portrays the one God not as infinitely generous, but as disconcertingly partisan. Not everyone receives the divine blessing; some are stricken with privation and with death, as if there were a cosmic shortage of salvation. Shortage—one land, one people, one nation—is inscribed in the Bible as a principle of unity.

Such narratives have had a more enduring impact on the thinking of believers than abstract ethical demands, and they have been given a place in the repertoire of the monotheistic models of action. Fidelity to this *one* God and the bond to this *one* community are the basis of property rights from which other persons are excluded.[24] This particularism is a powerful presupposition of religious violence.[25] In this case too, however, there is nothing automatic. The biblical God gives to human beings out of his superabundance, and all that he asks in return for his love is faith. It would be idolatry if those who receive the blessing were to turn the particularism of this blessing into a source of violence against those who are not blessed.[26]

Faith Communities as Bearers of Violent Actions

One further reservation about Jan Assmann's affirmations should be mentioned here. The community the Jews founded in Palestine after their return from exile in Babylon spoke a language that was no "semantic paradigm" devoid of practical consequences. After their return from captivity in Babylon in the fifth century BCE, the Jews received from the Persians the privilege of constituting an autonomous legal community. This allowed them to form a body that laid down its own regulations in agreement with the social legislation of Deuteronomy (Nehemiah 10). This community not only knew the Mosaic distinction between the true God and the many false gods; it also linked this to the social distinction between liberation and slavery. It made the words "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" its practical maxim.[27] All believers were obliged to ensure that the members of the community would not become the permanent slaves of foreigners.[28] When the temple in Jerusalem was desecrated in the second century BCE by Hellenistic rulers in alliance with apostate Jews, with the intention of depriving the community of its normative center, Jews rose up violently under the leadership of the Maccabees against collaborators in their own ranks, Hellenistic office bearers, and foreign troops.[29] The Book of Daniel interprets the dramatic events of the desecration and defilement of the sanctuary by adherents of Hellenism as a turning point in the history of Israel and the prelude to a new era of salvation. Unlike that of the Maccabees, however, its message is one of patient waiting. The Books of the Maccabees take a different line: anyone who dies in the struggle against the godless and for the ancestral laws, is counted as a martyr who will be awakened to eternal life. Violence with the aim of defending the Jewish faith community thereby became an exemplary religious act.

This means that as early as the believing Jews of classical antiquity, monotheism supplied a script for violence against unbelievers in a situation where the Mosaic social constitution of the Jewish community had to be defended against an expanding economic slavery and foreign rule in the political realm. In this regard, the Jewish Maccabean revolt is exceptionally instructive, since the believers had recourse to violence only when the threat to the religious ordering of their community also entailed a threat to its social ordering. Accordingly, the Jewish rebels were able to conclude a treaty of friendship with Gentiles such as the Roman senate when this treaty granted the Jewish community independence and self-administration (1 Macc. 8:23–28).[30] The case of ancient Judaism thus shows that the biblical paradigm of violence was applied when the obligatory nature of the community's values had to be defended against external foes; but if rulers who themselves were Gentiles were willing to ensure the existence of the Jewish community, it was even possible to conclude a treaty with them.

This suggests that exclusive Jewish monotheism never in practice achieved the monopoly Assmann attributes to it. It is therefore unsurprising that alongside or within monotheism there existed a belief in one God who was capable of cohabitation with other gods.[31] There were innumerable regulated forms of religious cohabitation between Jews and Gentiles in the pagan cities of classical antiquity. Not only could the Jewish creator God also be venerated by Gentiles as "the Most High," but Jewish citizens also engaged actively in propaganda among their Greek and Roman fellow citizens for their God as the true God of all human beings, a God who even possessed the extraordinary ability to overrule the fate to which all human beings were subject by virtue of their birth. According to this type of Jewish belief in one God, the particular divine powers received a subordinate, but recognized position. This "monarchical" view of monotheism was so solidly anchored in Judaism that Peter Schäfer calls Assmann's exclusive monotheism a "bogeyman that never existed in this way."[32] Schäfer dismisses as absurd Assmann's suggestion (made in all seriousness) that anti-Semitism can be explained as the indirect consequence of exclusive Jewish monotheism.[33] The occurrence of anti-Semitism in Greek cities is much too local in terms of place and time, and too specific, to allow us to see it as only the reverse of genuine Jewish monotheism. Rather, an open and tolerant faith in one God was the basis of the peaceful coexistence of Jews and non-Jews in the religious pluralism of the cities of antiquity. Subsequent to classical antiquity, moreover, the boundary between God and the supernatural powers of this world was fluid for the mediaeval Jewish Kabbalah. It was only in the course of the rejection of such views by philosophers of the modern period that a "purified," exclusive monotheism came to prevail within Judaism.

Similar observations have been made with regard to Christianity. Here, too, scholars no longer assume a necessary connection between monotheism and the persecution of those holding different beliefs. The violence practiced in the Middle Ages against heretics, apostates, Jews, and pagans was not the consequence of a monotheistic tradition of violence and intolerance but was generated by specific local and historical conditions.[34] The generalization from individual cases to a picture of the Middle Ages as a downright "persecuting society" is rejected today on the basis of strong arguments.[35] The historical reality of the Middle Ages was characterized by a plurality—which however must be sought behind a terminology that often sounds a different note. It is true that monotheism generated a greater sensitivity to religious diversity; as Michael Borgolte has shown, it is to this circumstance that Europe owes the "discovery of its plurality."[36] The positions taken by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic authorities against compulsory conversion likewise made a contribution to the understanding of faith as an individual decision; this made the individual and his or her personal conviction a central religious value.[37] For a long time, however, this value did not go as far as the acceptance of a turning away from the faith: after the Christianization of the Roman empire, apostasy was punished as a crime, and the apostate lost his civil rights.

Like Christianity, Islam formulated rules regarding the toleration of other religions. It acknowledged the preceding revelations to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but while it respected the Jews and Christians as "people of the book," a series of legal gradations ensured that they did not have the same status as Muslims. Although Muslims could conclude treaties with unbelievers, apostates were persecuted all the more rigorously within Islam and were deprived of their rights.

A close examination of these monotheistic cases of violence shows that they all give the lie to the idea of any kind of necessary link between monotheism and violence. Assmann is correct to say that one must not infer a practice from the language of violence; but the instances of apostasy and of the violent defense of the faith community against its foes also give the lie to the opposite thesis, namely, that monotheism is peaceful per se, and religious violence is never imaginable except as an abuse. There is a link between monotheism and violence, but one must call this contingent: it is neither necessary nor impossible. It depends on the current situation of a faith community.

A look at the modern history of violence in Hinduism shows that this link exists even independently of the monotheistic religions. Sudhir Kakar comments as follows on the religious conflicts that keep on erupting between Hindus and Muslims: "What we are witnessing today is less the resurgence of religion than (in the felicitous Indian usage) of communalism where a community of believers not only has religious affiliation but also social, economic, and political interests in common, which may conflict with corresponding interests of another community of believers sharing the same geographical space."[38] And even Buddhism (where one would least expect it) generates violence. After giving an account of the nerve-gas attack by the Buddhist sect Aum Shinrikyo on the underground in Tokyo in 1995, Mark Juergensmeyer asks how even a religion that teaches nonviolence can justify violence.[39]

Religious Frameworks of Everyday Communal Actions

These findings of the study of religion require us to define more precisely the relationship between faith communities and violent action. My starting point is the fact that religious violence seldom has its cause in purely religious conflicts; usually, it occurs in the context of a clash between secular social interests. Hence the metaphor of religion as a "cloak," or talk of religion as an "ideology" or of the "instrumentalization" or "manipulation" of religion. However, these concepts disguise the nature of the link between the two types of action instead of clarifying it. In point of fact, Max Weber has elaborated a thesis that clarifies the state of affairs and also shows plausibly why one should have recourse to concepts from the sociological theory of action when one analyzes religious violence.

In *Economy and Society,* Weber constructs religion as a specific ordering of community action alongside law, governance, and economy. He avoids defining the essence of religion, limiting himself to investigating the conditions and effects of this kind of communal action:

> The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, purposes of the individuals concerned—in short from the viewpoint of the religious behavior's meaning (*Sinn*). The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to *this* world. "That it may go well with thee and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon earth" expresses the reason for the performance of actions enjoined by religion or magic.[40]

The only possible source of an understanding of religious action is the meaning that the actors ascribe to it. In order to describe this expectation of salvation, Weber quotes the Bible: "That it may go well with thee and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon earth" (Eph. 6:2–3). Meaning is not a formal category representing the mediated relationship of humanity to the world; rather, Weber is following the German historians of religion of his period, who saw "meaning" as the outstanding achievement of religion in a world that, taken by itself, was devoid of meaning.[41]

Accordingly, the difference between religious and nonreligious conduct lies not in the difference between types of action, but in a specific expectation on the part of the actor, which can be linked to various types of action. From this perspective, every everyday action can become religious, provided that the actor frames it with a corresponding expectation of salvation. Since Weber sees the constitutive principle of religion not in a subjective experience of the holy but in a common experience of meaninglessness, the communality is the presupposition for the generation of such a meaning for conduct—community (*Gemeinschaft*), not as the antithesis of society (*Gesellschaft*),[42] but as the bearer of a specific way of looking at the world that processes the experience of absurdity, possesses a certain autonomy, is capable of development, and enters into reciprocal relationships with the other forms of community, such as family, neighborhood, ethnic group, law, and governance. These reciprocal relationships can be favorable or obstructing.[43]

In order to define the extent to which religious expectations inspire social actions, a special kind of concept must be constructed. For this purpose, Weber elaborated the instrument of the ideal types, which, as Karl Jaspers puts it, are "not generic concepts under which reality is subsumed, but concepts of meaning against which reality is measured, in order to grasp it succinctly to the extent that it corresponds to these concepts, and in order to display clearly, by means of these concepts, the de facto existence of that which does not correspond to them. They are not the goal of knowledge . . . but a means to make us as clearly aware as possible of the specific character of the human reality that is under consideration."[44] In the case of the problem of religious violence, this means that one must assume that violent actions will be interpreted in terms of religious meanings, although this does not mean that nonreligious motives, goals, and interpretations are excluded.

Definitions of the Situation and the Choice of a Model of Conduct

I believe that an approach drawing on the theory of action that has been developed by sociologists, following Max Weber, and by American pragmatism offers the most appropriate instruments for the analysis of such cases. Such an approach pays much greater attention to the definitions of the situation and to the interpretative frameworks employed thereby than do explanatory approaches whose point of departure is a "translation" of theoretical, dogmatic, or normative principles into a subjective practice. Situations are not the external field in which intentions that exist outside the situation are put into action; rather, situations are defined only by the actors. Hans Joas observes: "The concept of 'situation' [is] well suited to replace the pattern of goal/means as the first basic category of a theory of action."[45]

Hartmut Esser outlined his approach, which derives from the theory of rational choice, in an essay and subsequently developed it considerably in a number of books.[46] Many of his observations and concepts are helpful in the clarification of our problem. He begins by remarking that there is no direct correlation between people's attitudes and their de facto conduct. What people anticipate they will do in some particular situation, in response to questionnaires about their attitudes, does not necessarily coincide with what they in fact do. The social psychologist Richard T. LaPiere published a study of this as long ago as 1934–1935, based on the case of a young Chinese married couple who visited 67 hotels, auto camps, and "tourist homes" and 184 restaurants and cafés in the United States. With only one exception, they were never refused admittance to any hotel or restaurant because of their Chinese "race"; indeed, they were given specially favorable treatment in 72 cases. When LaPiere wrote to the hoteliers and restaurateurs six months later and asked whether they would admit or serve members of the Chinese race, however, of the 51 percent of those who replied, 91 percent stated that they would not do so—a blatant contradiction of the fact that, with only one exception, the couple had not been refused admittance anywhere.[47] Esser notes that the extreme discrepancy between attitudes and conduct has surprised and disconcerted many social scientists.[48]

Similarly, scientists of religion do well not to assume a causality between religious beliefs and actions. It is only when one acknowledges this discrepancy that one can grasp why there is no necessary connection between an exclusive belief in one God and the practice of violence. Religious convictions do not directly and immediately determine corresponding behavior. If, however, there is no necessary linkage between religious beliefs and violent actions, a different model for this kind of connection must be developed; and this is the intention of the present book.

Esser entitled his chapter on the case of the Chinese couple "Das Thomas-Theorem," alluding to a conclusion reached by William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas in a joint study published in 1928: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[49] Every action presupposes a definition of the situation. This is not generated of necessity by the situation itself, however, but is "imposed" on the situation by the subjects. If they then act in accordance with this definition, this "imposition" has real effects. It is true that routine usually saves subjects from having to come up with a definition on their own. When a definition becomes less plausible, however—for instance, as a result of disappointed expectations—the actors can suddenly become conscious that they have still further possibilities of defining the situation in which they find themselves.

They then switch from an "automatic" to a "reflective" mode. This does not mean that they can interpret every situation arbitrarily; they remain dependent on external conditions, and their intentions do not exist independently of the situation in which they find themselves. But the external circumstances do not compel them to accept one particular definition. This opens up room for maneuver, which is foreclosed by the acceptance of a single interpretation. When they undertake a new "framing" of the situation, one criterion of its success is whether it is communicable and recognizable.

Here, the availability of the various scenarios plays a role. Esser speaks of "framing" or "the selection of the referential framework." When the actors create a definition, they rely on established concepts of action and choose one of these as binding. The choice of an "action" can be oriented to purposive rationality, to tradition, or to feelings. The framework can also be established in accordance with values whose validity is based on its opposition to a completely different reality, as happens above all in the constitution of individual or communal identity.[50]

When they construct a framework, actors bind themselves to the "models of the course of social action conserved" in the framework "as knowledge." When actors adopt such a script and take their places in a scenario, they bind themselves to one particular sequence of courses of action—cognitive, emotional, and social. The mode of entering into such models of action is, however, dependent on further principles. For example, an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction will establish different options for conduct once a model is adopted.

Religious violence cannot be explained sufficiently as a misuse and manipulation of religion. The following study situates religious violence in a course of action. It follows step by step the genesis of religious acts of violence and reflects on the situations, interpretative patterns, and scripts used by both the faith community and its enemies. It also investigates the extent to which categories such as cult, fundamentalism, or terrorism help us to understand courses of action and asks whether the application of such categories to certain communities may influence the attitude of media and the state in their regard.

In order to grasp religious violence as a part of a complex drama, the field of investigation will be widened from the individual perpetrator and his motives to the action itself, and from the action to the meaning ascribed to it by members of the faith community in question and by their enemies. We shall also look at other actors, such as organized groups, who remain in the background but play a determinative role in the action's course.