Empire, Violence, Religion, and Resistance
An Intercultural and Interreligious Perspective

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What can we learn from nonviolent resistance movements from past millennia that might assist us in resolving today’s conflicts? Can the new movements among the Abrahamic religions join together to bring peace to our violent world?

The relation between systems of domination, violence, and religion in society is as old as human civilizations. Throughout history, religious structures and institutions, as well as the spiritual and cultural power of religion, have often (if not always) been used by both systems of social control and oppression and the resistance movements to these systems. The Jesus movement of religious renewal at the origin of Christianity is an example of such resistance to the Roman imperial domination system.

This article provides intercultural and interreligious perspectives on religious renewal movements and resistance to systems of domination. In the first part, using new insights from biblical scholarship, I briefly describe the sociopolitical context in which the Jesus movement developed. My intention in this part is to point out the relation between religious renewal movements and resistance to domination systems in the formative Christian experience. An understanding of this dimension of the Jesus movement, I argue, provides an important perspective for theological reflection on other similar historical contexts. In the second part, I give three examples of Christian movements of resistance to systems of domination.

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in three local churches in Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico. In all three instances the transformation of the social violence caused by the systems of domination was central to the faith, theological vision, and pastoral action of these local churches and their leaders, some of whom, like Jesus, were also killed as a result of their commitment to these struggles. In the third and last part, I briefly look at the difficult and ambiguous issue of violence and the role of religion in the Middle East today. I focus on some new Muslim movements of resistance to what they perceive as colonial/imperial systems of domination. Reflecting on these new movements in light of the first two parts, I argue in conclusion, could help us see commonalities across religions and cultures in the relationship between movements of religious renewal and resistance to domination systems. This perspective could help us reflect critically on the generalizations that dominate the public discourse on religion and violence in other cultures and rethink the relation between violence and Western modernity.

Roman Imperial Religion

The widespread experience of war and violence that are related to the multiple systems of domination (neoliberal economic globalization, exploitation, militarism, domination of natural resources, etc.) in today’s world is reminiscent of other similar historical periods. Scholars in the social sciences, religious studies, and theology are drawing parallels between our era and the Roman Empire. In his recent work God and Empire, biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan argues that imperial violence is inherent to human civilizations since their origin. Civilization, he notes, “has always been imperial—that is, empire is the normalcy of civilization’s violence. . . . If you oppose empire-as-such, you are taking on what has been the normalcy of civilization’s brutality for at least the last six thousand years.” Crossan asks: “How, then, did civilization’s violent injustice become normal?” (Crossan, 30–33). Basing his analysis on the work of social scientist Michael Mann, Crossan outlines four foundations of Rome’s imperial social power and demonstrates how violence was a constitutive element of Roman ideology. These four foundations are: (1) military power, which was based on legions stationed in key locations around the frontiers of the Empire from where they could reach and control by force the whole territory when needed; (2) economic power, which used the military infrastructure to dominate commerce in the whole Empire and allowed the flow of agricultural products to Rome and other important centers; (3) political power, which was established through alliances with local elites that included aristocrats and also religious leaders; and (4) ideological power, which glorified Rome, its emperors, and values, and was sustained by an imperial theology (Crossan, 30–33).
Among the four foundations, Roman imperial theology, argues Crossan, was the glue that held the Empire together. It emphasized the divine nature of Roman emperors (sons of God) and the transcendental nature of Rome “as an empire divinely mandated to rule without limits of time or place. It did not simply proclaim domination around the Mediterranean Sea. It announced world conquest, global rule, and eternal sovereignty . . . [through] an immensely successful advertising campaign that inundated everyone, everywhere, from all sides and at all times” (Crossan, 12–16; Carter, 7–8, and 83–92).

The program advertised by this campaign had four themes: religion, war, victory, and peace, notes Crossan. It is against the background of this campaign that the first Christians, he argues, had to present a positive counterprogram of peace through justice (Crossan, 29).

From a historical perspective, Augustus Caesar unified the Roman Empire, strengthened its army and economy, and established peace by force around the Mediterranean Sea during his reign (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.). He was celebrated as founder, father, and savior of divine Rome who brought prosperity and established peace. But not everyone under his imperial rule had the same experience of prosperity and peace; this certainly was not the experience of the Jewish people in Ancient Palestine. In Jesus and Empire, Richard Horsley illustrates the historical and social conditions of the Jewish people around the time of Jesus (Horsley, 59). Horsley notes that Roman aristocrats and a small number of elite citizens comprised 2 to 3 percent of the population of the Empire, and they experienced prosperity and peace. However, the generations of Jewish peasants around the time of Jesus, that is, under King Herod the Great (who ruled Judea and Galilee 37–34 B.C.E.) and his son Herod Antipas (who ruled over Galilee during the time of Jesus, 4 B.C.E.–39 C.E.), experienced exploitation, devastation, impoverishment, enslavement, and massacres, especially during the Roman reconquest of the area near Nazareth, the village community where Jesus grew up. The Roman Empire was a hierarchical, aristocratic empire, notes biblical scholar Warren Carter, and “it is this hierarchy and control that Jesus describes negatively, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over them, and their great ones are tyrants over
The situation of total domination, adds Carter, “deprives people of dignity. It is degrading and humiliating. . . . Moreover, elites legitimated and expressed their domination with an ideology or set of convictions. They asserted it was the will of the gods. . . . Studies have shown, though, that whenever dominating power is asserted, there is resistance . . . such as the revolt in Judea against Rome in 66–70 C.E.” (Carter, 10–11).

The ways in which politics, economics, culture, and religion were intertwined, both in the Roman Empire and in the multiple Jewish movements of resistance, which include the movement that Jesus was part of, are much more complex than articulated in the above brief synopsis. However, these insights into the socio-political context around the time of Jesus, I would argue, provide a helpful background for a critical theological reflection on the issue of violence and the role of religion in first-century Palestine, as well as in our time.

The Jesus Movement

The radicality of God’s nonviolent justice,” asserts Crossan, “confronts the normalcy of human civilization’s violent injustice at a very specific time and a very specific place” (Crossan, 111). Jesus and his followers understood God to be present and acting among them in their communities, despite the unbearable conditions imperial power and its systems inflicted upon them. “Convinced that Roman rulers and their Herodian and high-priestly clients had been condemned by God, however,” maintains Horsley, “Jesus acted to heal the effects of empire and to summon people to rebuild their community life” (Horsley, 105; see also Crossan, 122–23).

What were some of the main features of this alternative movement to the violence of Roman imperial domination? Biblical scholars affirm that what Jesus initiated is primarily a Jewish movement of religious renewal. This renewal movement, Horsley explains, was rooted in the Mosaic covenant, which was well known in the religious culture of the peasant communities where Jesus mainly taught and healed people. Systems of oppression, such as the one imposed by the Romans, directly affect social and economic relations and people’s physical and social well-being. The Jesus movement appealed to the profound religious/cultural beliefs of the people about God’s presence with them in their struggle against the injustice and oppression of the Romans and their client Jewish rulers. An integral part of people’s faith and their historical and cultural memory was that God is stronger than the systems of injustice and the powers that represent them, and that these systems have already been condemned by God and will be destroyed. The teachings of Jesus, his healings, and his presence among the people empowered them to experience God’s action in their midst despite their difficult historical conditions of oppression. Through a new vision of faith in the reign of God, which Jesus
proclaimed and inaugurated, many people experienced renewal of their faith and community life. Recognizing in Jesus and his community God’s presence and action among them gave them a new hope for change (see Horsley, 105–28; Crossan, 97–142).

The response of Jesus and his movement to Roman imperial domination in Ancient Palestine was not the only alternative; there were several other Jewish resistance movements before and after Jesus that had different theologies and strategies. Also, New Testament scholars argue that in the early Christian communities the alternatives to imperial domination vary in different communities across the Empire (Tamez). Whatever the responses were, one could assert, however, that Jesus’ confrontation with the systems of domination and his death and resurrection were foundational events for the faith of these communities.

In the next section, I use the above as a framework for looking at articulations of some recent Christian movements of religious renewal and struggle against domination systems in Latin America. These movements were not ahistorical imitations of the Jesus movement; rather, they were in their own ways concrete responses to faith in the God of Jesus in different historical situations of domination.

Religion and Resistance: Examples from Latin America

The three examples of struggle against systems of domination in local churches I discuss below from Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico, respectively, are by no means unique or isolated in the experience of the universal church. They are part of broad, diverse, and rich movements that spread across history in Latin America and elsewhere from the time of Jesus to the present day.

Ignacio Ellacuría, the late Jesuit theologian and martyr from El Salvador, argues that the church began to understand violence differently after the Latin American Bishops’ conference in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. In its commitment to social peacemaking, the church became more attentive to institutional injustice that generates structural violence. Structural violence, notes Ellacuría, “is simply structural injustice, the injustice of social structures, sanctioned by an unjust legal framework and an ideology based on cultural framework, which as such bring about the institutionalization of injustice.” The concept as such was not new, he adds, “but it took longer to see the violent nature of structures, of the economic order, of society, and the apparatus of the law” (Ellacuría, 70).

In the Spiral of Violence, Dom Hélder Câmara, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Recife, Brazil, who was ordained shortly after the military coup in 1964, articulates well the church’s understanding of structural injustice and imperial violence. Critiquing the general situation of humanity and the discourse on development of his time, Câmara notes:
Look closely at the injustices in the underdeveloped countries, in the relations between the developed world and the underdeveloped world. You will find that everywhere the injustices are a form of violence. . . . Now the egoism of some privileged groups drives countless human beings into this sub-human condition, where they suffer restrictions, humiliations, injustices; without prospects, without hope, their condition is that of slaves. This established violence, this violence No. 1, attracts violence No. 2, revolt, either of the oppressed themselves or of youth, firmly resolved to battle for a more just and human world. (Câmara, 29–30)

Câmara strongly critiqued the systems of domination of his time. Both socialist and capitalist imperial powers, he contends, were guilty of causing social injustice. “The capitalist empires, with their affirmation of sacrifice for the free world, of defense of private enterprise, of safeguarding order from subversion and chaos, are in fact defending their political prestige and the economic interests arising from it” (Câmara, 50). It was quite clear to Hélder Câmara then that there are two forms of peace: false and true. False peace is deceptive, built on lies, false promises, and domination by military force and oppression. True peace, on the other hand, “for which we are prepared to give our lives, presupposes that the rights of all are fully respected” (Câmara, 59). Those who proclaim the Gospel and demand justice as a condition for peace, he adds, risk imprisonment, torture, and death (Câmara, 48–49).

In the 1970s, movements of resistance to systems of domination, similar to the ones described by Hélder Câmara, emerged in many Central American countries. Christians, many of them Catholics and poor, constituted the majority in these movements. They were supported by some church leaders who were inspired by the new social teaching of Vatican II and the Latin American bishops. Many people in these movements experienced brutal confrontation, collective torture, violation of their human rights, and even genocides at the hands of their own (“Christian, Catholic”) governments and armies. In El Salvador in the 1980s, for example, thousands of poor, organized Christian campesinos, including many catechists, lay women and men, members of religious organizations, and ordained priests were killed. Most known is the case of the assassination on March 24, 1980, of Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador, who was a key figure and spokesperson for the church that supported these movements of resistance.

For Romero, resistance to the structural violence of the imperial system is central to the theological vision and pastoral commitment of the church. Violence, he said in his third pastoral letter,

finds expression in the structure and daily functioning of a socio-economic and political system that takes it for granted that progress is impossible unless the majority of the people are used as a productive force under the control of a privileged minority. Historically, we come across this sort of violence whenever the
institutional structures of a society operate to the benefit of a minority or systematically discriminate against groups or individuals who defend the true common good. . . . Alongside institutionalized violence there frequently arises repressive violence—that is to say, the use of violence by the state security forces to contain the aspirations of the majority, violently crushing any signs of protest against the injustices we have mentioned. This is a real violence. It is unjust because through it, the state, acting from above and with all its institutional power, defends the survival of the prevailing socio-economic and political system. (Romero, 106–7)

My third and more recent example is from the diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. On January 1, 1994, a group of indigenous peoples calling themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), who form the majority of the population in the diocese, rose up in arms and declared war on the Mexican State and army. Their main demands focused on justice for the indigenous and campesino communities. In their First Declaration, “Today We Say Enough Is Enough!” they clearly describe their five hundred years of resistance first against slavery and then the ongoing struggle for justice against a sequence of imperial powers, which they consider the main cause of their misery. These powers, they say,

do not care that we have nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a roof over our heads, no land, no work, no health care, no food nor education. Nor are we able to freely and democratically elect our political representatives, nor is there independence from foreigners, nor is there peace nor justice for ourselves and our children. (Zapatistas, 49)

In the aftermath of the Vatican II and the Latin American Bishops’ Synod in Medellin, Colombia, the leadership of the Diocese of San Cristóbal forged a new relationship of solidarity with the indigenous peoples and their movements of struggle for justice. However, despite the efforts of solidarity, the movements failed to bring any significant systemic change that would improve the miserable life conditions of these communities. In 1993, one year before the uprising, the diocese issued a pastoral letter that outlined the history of struggle of its indigenous peoples and the main stages of its pastoral work. The document also describes the atrocities committed against indigenous communities and argues that in the name of modernization, globalization and free trade, these communities were being deprived of land, justice, education, democracy, and the basic conditions needed for living with dignity (Ruiz).

Bishop Samuel Ruiz, a key actor of the diocesan movement, spoke on several occasions about the struggle of the indigenous peoples against the violence of the
political, economic, and cultural systems imposed on them. In an interview with the author, he noted that

potential for violence exists from the moment that a dominating society exists. In Chiapas, there is already a systemic violence. In Medellin, we spoke of three types of violence: the violence of the social system, which generated 15,000 deaths [in Chiapas] last year—deaths, not from sickness, but from hunger alone. It is a criminal violence, a violence of death. When the people began to organize themselves, after having taken individual measures to find a solution to these problems, they found a second violence: repression, torture, unjust incarceration and death. Then comes a third form of violence which is a response to the first two. When this arises we say “there is violence,” but we forget the other two prior forms of violence which we do not speak about. . . . You are looking at the whole system right there. (Catholic New Times [Toronto], September 25, 1994)

**Religion and Resistance in the Middle East Today**

There is no place in the world today where one can see more clearly the chaos caused by the political, economic, and military imperial dominance than in the Middle East. Unlike other parts of the world that experienced some freedom and progress after the end of the colonial period, the Arab world continued to face an imperial threat. After the end of World War II, Western colonial powers supported the foundation of the State of Israel, which presented itself as an extension of the West in the midst of the Arab world. Through the power of the State of Israel and the direct U.S. intervention, especially after the discovery of the oil reserves in the region, a new phase of Western hegemony began. The military defeat of the Arab countries in 1948 and 1967 in unequal and unfair imposed battles and the militarization of the region in their aftermath subjected the Middle East to a series of political oligarchies supported by military regimes. In addition to external imperial domination, people endured internal oppression by their own governments, which had to suppress the people in order to maintain their power. In addition, the Middle East is the only region in the world where Western powers (in coordination with Israel) impose policy on local governments and rulers. This neocolonial situation continues unchanged in most countries of the region to the present day. In most Arab countries today, those who dare to critique this situation risk their own lives. The late Lebanese-Palestinian activist, academic, and journalist Samir Kassir, just to name one example, was assassinated on June 2, 2005, by a terrorist bomb and paid his own life as a price for speaking truth to power (see Kassir, 91–121, for a historico-political perspective of the developments in the Arab world over the last century). In the same vein as Kassir, Arab-American historian and political analyst Rashid Khalidi argues that the current struggle for change
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In the Middle East is not only directed against outside imperial threats but also against the corruption of established traditional power elites who collaborate with and depend on the protection of imperial powers (Khalidi, 69).

Using an example from Lebanon, I briefly discuss in this part of the essay the new religious revival and resistance movements among the Shi’a Muslims. In general, however, traditional religious institutions and structures, both Christian and Muslim, have historically been on the side of power elites. Most political resistance movements in the Middle East, at least until the 1970s, were secular. The rise of significant Islamic resistance movements is a relatively recent development. I also point in this section to the emerging interreligious (Muslim-Christian) movements of social transformation and resistance to current systems of domination, which, I claim, open a new horizon for thinking about religion, violence, and peacemaking in the region.

Shi’a Islamic resistance movements in South Lebanon go back to the 1970s. They began as religious revival movements dedicated to attaining political rights for the dispossessed and marginalized Shi’a within the Lebanese system. During the civil war (1975–90), and later under Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon (1982–2000), some of these organizations chose the path of armed resistance to protect their rights and resist occupation. One of these groups is Hizbullah, which is deeply rooted in the ancient prophetic Shi’a tradition of struggle against injustice and humiliation and was inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the 1980s. Hizbullah built an armed resistance to fight against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon and the U.S.-Israeli politics of domination in the region. Cultural anthropologist Lara Deeb believes that this group is misrepresented in Western media as a terrorist organization. Over time, she argues, Hizbullah has grown significantly and developed into both a legitimate political party and an umbrella organization of social welfare institutions. In addition to its dedication to the poor and social justice, Hizbullah’s ideologies, adds Deeb, appeal to other Lebanese movements of resistance across religious, ethnic, and class lines. The organization is “viewed as providing a viable alternative to a U.S.-supported government and its neo-liberal economic project,” maintains Deeb. Political analyst Amal Saad-Ghorayeb agrees with Deeb and argues that...
the organization has evolved over the years to become a national movement in resistance to the “New Middle East” plan, which it sees as advancing the U.S.-Israeli hegemony over the region.

Like many other religious movements of resistance, the strength of this group of Islamic resistance to domination lies more in its strong religious beliefs, social network, and cultural rootedness than in its military capability and political ideology. “It is impossible,” notes anthropologist Augustus Norton, “to appreciate the striking durability and loyalty that modern Shi’i groups, such as Hezbollah (or comparable groups in Iraq, for instance), generate unless one understands that their strength derives from the strong social fabric that they have woven over the years” (Norton, 112). An interesting new development in such a movement of Islamic resistance is the new relations of solidarity that it is forging with other religious, political, and cultural groups, particularly with a large sector of the Christian community in Lebanon. The interreligious and cross-cultural character of the opposition coalition to the “New Middle East” project of the current U.S. administration and to the neoliberal government of Lebanon supported by traditional elites, financial tycoons, and Western powers is a new development. Despite enormous international, regional, and local pressures, this opposition coalition has demonstrated over the past years the potential for nonviolent political and social transformation, and more important, for intercommunal reconciliation. Their concrete grassroots activities are restoring the trust capable of healing the scars from long years of the civil war and the wounds of social violence caused by many years of occupation and humiliation.

**Traditions of Renewal and Resistance**

On the one hand, imperial powers develop their own theology and ideology of conquest and domination and co-opt religious institutions and movements to enforce their hegemony. We have seen this in the example of the Roman Empire, and we see it in modern-day imperial projects of global domination. On the other hand, contrary to this theology of domination, resistance against the dehumanizing violence of domination systems was central in the founding narratives of many religions across cultures, particularly to the three Abrahamic religions of the Middle East. In Judaism, we learn this from the narrative of the freedom of the slaves in Egypt and from the Jewish prophetic tradition. In Islam, we see this clearly in the Qur’an and the movement initiated by the Prophet Muhammad in the context of economic and social oppression in Mecca, which was opposed and rejected by the Meccan ruling class (Esack, 45–52). In Christianity, this is clear in the life of Jesus and the witness of the early Christian movement, discussed in the first section of this article.
The above analyses and insights demonstrate that in these situations religion is not the primary source of violence; rather, it is the global economic, political, and military systems of domination, which the above-mentioned movements of resistance call *violence number one*. Prophetic religious traditions and movements of religious renewal and resistance, across cultures, could help unmask structural violence and provide important ethical critique to the violence of Western secular modernity and its ideology of progress and domination. Such voices are necessary for the future of world peace, a peace built on justice rather than on war and domination. The irony is that, in the name of progress, democracy, and peacemaking, the current global systems of domination are causing most of the suffering and death of the poor and the weak of our world. It is time we rethink the main source of violence.

**References**


