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Introduction: Resisting "Imperial Peace"

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Resisting Imperial Peace
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In the name of promoting "freedom, democracy and global peace," several interrelated systems of dominance, supported by economic globalization, imposition of global neoliberal policies, imperial political approach, cultural hegemony, patriarchy and racism, and the expansion of US military interventions around the world are causing more violence and division among peoples at an unprecedented global scale. Consider, for example, the latest US wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq, the manipulation of the Middle East peace process while continuing to confiscate Palestinian land, the implementation of apartheid policies to give the occupation a permanent character (ignoring international law and pressure from the international community), the continuing expansion of US-Israeli hegemony in the region, and the war on terror. Military intervention promises "peace" through a never-ending war on terror. Since Barack Obama was elected president of the US in 2008, his administration has toned down this rhetoric. Yet, similar imperial peace policies (particularly the intensification of the War on Terror) and the colonial attitude in dealing with the Middle East continue.

While Christians have increasingly critiqued imperial peace, this analysis is not always tied to a critique of the United States itself as empire. As Marcus Briggs-Cloud argues in this volume, the United States is fundamentally constituted through a politics of imperial peace because its existence is fundamentally contingent upon the continuing genocide and colonialism of indigenous peoples. Rosetta Ross further explores how imperial peace is founded on a global anti-Black racism that structures both U.S. society and its foreign policy. Consequently, this issue addresses this gap by focusing on the relationship between empire and settler colonialism and white supremacy. By centering the analysis, theologians of color in these articles highlight the need to go beyond a politics of "U.S. out of [insert country]" to explore a critical interrogation of the United States itself. What lacks sufficient attention is an analysis of the United States as already empire – its existence is contingent on the continuing colonization of indigenous nations. The complicity of the United States in empire around the world is not an aberration to U.S. democratic ideals, it is the fulfillment of these ideals. By doing so, we see

how the logics of anti-black racism, settler colonialism, and war that constitute the United States serve to promote imperial peace both here and abroad. Furthermore, as several of these articles argue, communities of color themselves are often complicit in the propagation of imperial peace. Consequently, this volume serves to explain not just the relationship between racialization and empire, but also to examine how people of color become ideologically, theologically, and politically complicit in maintaining these relationship.

The collection of essays in this volume by theologians and activists offers a variety of new insights from different cultural, biblical, theological, political and social perspectives that help us better understand the complex interconnectedness between systems of dominance and the development of religious beliefs and practices. The writers, all members of EATWOT, the US chapter of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, have compiled in this collection of essays the fruit of many years of research, analysis, social action and reflection.

Michel Andraos provides a foundation by examining the current politics within the Middle East that have provided a central focal point for the United States' war on terror. Andraos addresses the war in Lebanon and the demonization of Islam as well as Arab resistance struggles in the area. Looking particularly at the Shi'a Islamist movements in Lebanon as an example, his essay offer a synopsis of the historical background of these movements and the sociopolitical context in which they evolved as resistance movements. He briefly discusses their evolving religious, social, and political vision and practice, and explores their contribution to social change resistance to systems of domination (colonialism, imperialism and internal oppression) as well as to imposed imperial peace. Smith examines the politics behind Christian

Zionism and the complicated relationship between Christian evangelicalism, Islamaphobia, and the state of Israel. In particular, she focuses on how Christian Zionism is predicated on racial logics inherent within the U.S. context itself that biologizes both Islam and Judaism. However, she argues, these racial logics are not stable: while in some sectors of evangelicalism, these logical support genocidal policies against Palestinian peoples, in other sectors, they are being redeployed to critique the state of Israel.

Critique of imperial dominance in all its forms has been a central theme for Christian theologies from the margins since the beginnings of Christianity, as the narratives about Jesus' life and teaching in the gospels make clear. One could argue that the gospels are primarily books of theology from the margins that proposed an alternative theology and way to life to the one imposed by the Roman Empire. In *Jesus and Empire*, Richard Horsley illustrated the historical and social conditions of the Jewish people around the time of Jesus.[1] Horsley notes that while Roman aristocrats and a small number of elite citizens, who comprised 2 to 3 percent of the population of the empire, experienced prosperity and peace, the generations of Jewish peasants around the time of Jesus, that is under king Herod the Great, who was appointed by the Romans and ruled over Judea and Galilee (37-4 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 re-conquest of the area near Nazareth, the village community where Jesus grew up.

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[1] Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 59.

The communities of faith in the risen Jesus, his message and teachings that formed in the decades after his death resisted Roman imperial dominance and ideology, and the religious systems, Jewish and Roman, that sustained imperial dominance. Central to the early "Christian" communities was not just resistance but also the proposal of an alternative vision of faith in a different reality proclaiming that "another world is possible," to use a proclamation of faith from the social movements of our day. Creating the new reality was grounded in Jesus' proclamation and inauguration of the "reign of God" as an alternative to other reigns of domination, and the building of a new society of communities where God's peace reign, not imperial peace.

In recent years, there is a growing number of publications by scholars of early Christianity that has helped us better understand the resistance to imperial domination of the first communities of believers in Jesus and his message. John Dominic Crossan, building on new theoretical work in social sciences on the Roman Empire, outlined four foundations of this imperial social order and demonstrates how violence was a constitutive element of Roman ideology. The 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 include aristocrats and also religious leaders; and 4) ideological power, which glorified Rome, its emperors and values, and was sustained by an imperial

theology.[2] (Crossan, 30-31) Among the four foundations, argues Crossan, Roman imperial theology was the glue that held the empire together.

The ways in which politics, economics, culture and religion were intertwined, both in the Roman Empire as well as in the multiple Jewish movements of resistance, which include the movement Jesus was part of, are much very complex. However, the insights into the sociopolitical context around the time of Jesus mentioned above, we would argue, provide a helpful background for a critical theological reflection on the issue of violence and the role of religion during the formative years of Christian faith in first-century Palestine and the resistance of early Christian communities to imperial peace.

Using the fourth gospel as a lens to look at the shadow of death that accompanied John's Jesus from the early chapters of the gospel, Tat-siong Benny Liew, in his "Not Just Peace: Living and Giving Life in the Shadow of Imperial Death," engages a wide range of post colonial literature and argues that the so called Roman imperial peace was dependent on death threats, torture and executions, which were used as a kind of visual terror to communicate that a similar fate would await anyone who dared to question or challenge the empire. Liew argues for reading John's Jesus as a colonized Jew who lived consciously in the shadow of death as type of "death bound subjectivity" given to him by his colonizers who reinterpreted death for the purposes of life and creating a new community that resists the fear of death and imperial control. Understanding John's Jesus in the colonial framework, contends Liew, provides a rationale for understanding John's emphasis on the caring community of life, which Liew calls "inventing a

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[2] John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome Then and Now* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 30-31.

different future." Building on Liew's analysis of imperial peace within the biblical scriptures, Randall C. Bailey explore the Black religious traditions, in particular the Negro Spirituals, and shows how some of these traditions have at their core resistance to imperial peace while other traditions did not resist, but instead capitulated to oppressive forces. Empires, argued Bailey, often co-opted indigenous religious beliefs and practices and used religion as a means of carrying out their oppressive ideologies and domination. At the same time, maintains Bailey, there are traditions within oppressed groups which work for liberation, often appealing to religious sources of the Empire to accomplish their goals and desires. Bailey also explores several biblical texts ranging from the Book of Genesis to the gospels and shows the tensions in the texts and the ways in which dominant class concerns compete with the voices of the poor and oppressed.

Tracing the historical development of different Christian interpretations of the meaning of Christ's death from the early centuries to the Middle Ages, commonly now known as atonement theology, Rita Nakashima Brock, in her article "Erotic Power: Resisting Imperial Love," claims that while it is difficult today in the West to imagine a time when the image of Jesus dead on the cross, his torture and suffering were not central to Christian piety, in fact, such images were not part of Christian religiosity for nearly a millennium. Examining some the main theological works of Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard and Bernard of Clairvaux, Brock argues that the imperial consolidation of Europe, beginning in the ninth century with the conquest of the church during the Carolingian period, lead to a shift in understanding Christian soteriology and anthropology. While an earlier theology, which the author argues originated in the early centuries of Christianity, emphasized Christian living primarily as the cultivation of wisdom, righteousness,

and works of justice and love in community as a response of gratitude for grace already given at baptism, the new shift, which reflects the imposition of an imperial theological anthropology in Middle Ages Europe, emphasized sin, suffering and redemption, and moved Christians increasingly towards love that was submissive, broken-hearted, and perpetually unrequited, always longing for final fulfillment, forgetting the resurrection. In her essay, Brock argues for recovering the sense of the spiritual power and bedrock sanctity of life on earth, of creation, and of human community. Love for the living, incarnate and risen Christ, she maintains in her conclusion, generates a different piety and moral sensibility than love for the suffering, dying Christ. Faithfulness to the risen Christ means commitment to the body of Christ, sustained by works of love and justice.

Adam Clark, Rosetta E. Ross, and Marcus Briggs-Cloud turn our attention to how imperial peace is manifested within the constitution of the United States itself. As mentioned previously, Briggs-Cloud argues that any movement addressing imperial peace must address how the United States is founded on an imperial peace maintained by the continuing colonization of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, argues Briggs-Cloud, indigenous peoples themselves become complicit in their own colonization when the struggle for decolonization becomes alienated from land such that Native peoples seek recognition for legal, political and social claims from the settler state rather than building a movement to dismantle the state. Ross argues that imperial peace rests on a global anti-Black racism. In her essay "Resisting Imperial Peace: Black Women and Self-Love," Rosetta E. Ross considers the ways in which the colonial legacy of Christianity and white supremacy intersect with heteropatriarchy in the lives of black women. Using slave

women stories, old and recent, from Africa and the US today, Ross explores how black women develop critical religious identities that do not reinscribe colonial meanings of "being Christian" in view of the hetero-patriarchal nature of Christianity. She argues that black women often have been coerced to function in roles that ordinarily belonged to others and as subordinates to enhance white life. Christian colonial concept "self-sacrifice," Ross argues, intersects with blackness as an identity and proposes new ways of expressing black female self-love amidst the legacies of coloniality and the polyvalent ideas and structures of Christianity. Intersecting with the notion of ambiguity of self-sacrifice as a way of generating new life in Liew's article on John's Jesus, Ross notes that several scholars challenge the idea of self-sacrifice as a Christian moral norm because it disadvantages women generally. Self-sacrifice, she maintains, is not meaningful for persons who daily confront social and political practices that oppose their existence. In the context of ordinary black female stigmatization, Ross argues that a contrasting self-presentation is a form of resistance that expresses self-awareness and hope, and may be a starting point for exploring a new meaning of self-love as a Christian norm for black women.

Centering the controversy around Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 Presidential elections, Adam Clark explores how Blackness becomes equated with "foreignness" and foreign threat. Assertions of Blackness are presumed to threaten the well-being of U.S. empire such that Barack Obama's blackness always cast his "Americanness" into doubt. However, rather than argue for a politics of inclusion that would attempt to render blackness "safe" for the United States, Clark proposes that we unapologetically embrace Blackness as a weapon against empire and imperial peace.

By centering then the voices of peoples of color in building movements for world peace, it becomes clear that peace cannot be achieved without dismantling the structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, no movement for world peace can be effective without assessing the complicity of Christian theologies and religious practices in enforcing these oppressive structures that ensure, as legal scholar Sora Han notes, that the United States is not simply at war, the United States is war. These essays call on us all to develop a holistic analysis and praxis for world peace. Anything less simply becomes "imperial peace."