

Religion and the masking of settler colonial systems of complicity

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Despite the reality that all faiths are grounded in love, empathy, and compassion, organized religions have been complicit in questionable practices that are based on control, a rejection of others and their beliefs, and feeding into the creation of oppressive states. We continue to see the conflation of faith and religion that, in the best-case scenario, invites tolerance and acceptance to live together in harmony, and in the worst-case scenario, serves as a tool to mask imperialist interests and cover up settler colonial agendas that manifest through religious conflicts over holy sites. The organization and institutionalization of religion have distorted principles of love, empathy, and compassion. Looking back on our known history, how many wars have started to control people's faith in the name of salvation, modernity, and enlightenment? There are countless examples, but the important lesson we can learn is that religious-guided wars have always been weaponized to either convert people through salvation wars, or enlightening wars, as cover-ups for colonial interests, or to eliminate people and claim their lands in the name of religions superiority and purification.

The ongoing genocide in Palestine is an embodiment of these tensions and has been since the Nakba in 1948. The Zionist settler colonial project in Palestine is premised on two

key claims: first, a land without a people to a people without a land; and second, the claim of the right to return to ancestral Jewish land in Palestine. For these claims to work, there is a need to manufacture the conditions required to uphold the false claim of 'a land without a people'—that is, to empty lands of its Indigenous population that have been inhabited for thousands of years, hence weaponizing colonial tools that dehistoricize Palestine and its people to manufacture global consent for the ongoing ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. The rejection of the Palestinian people and its history and cultures is a quintessential manifestation of colonial violence and control, made possible through religious propaganda used to appeal to 'people without a land.' We argue that such propaganda inherently builds on the weaponization of Jewish claims to Indigenous land—a core component of the Zionist justification of the creation of the settler colony of Israel.

This second claim of the so-called 'right to return' to ancestral Jewish land is thus an abuse of religion to mask the Zionist settler colonial agenda. Zionism employs one of the oldest colonial tactics, constructing the Indigenous population as an enemy; however, it does so alongside the construction of its own population as the victim. This serves to justify the need

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for violent measures against the Indigenous population not only to tame the 'savage' enemy but to protect its own group as the victims. This is where we begin to see the play between organized religions and imperial interests utilizing colonial tools of dehumanization and of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The occupation and genocide of Palestine has had significant changes of the «enemy» since 1948, but the victim always remained the same. The establishment of the settler colony of Israel as a Jewish state has served the purpose of constructing Israeli Jewish people as victims and played on the holocaust to affirm this victimhood in the years to come. This has taken shape in how Israel choses to design its most important institution, the «Israeli Defense Forces» to legitimize the Zionist claim of victimhood of the Jewish people and construct colonial violence as a 'defense' tactic against the 'dangerous' indigenous enemy.

While the 'enemy' of the state of Israel has shifted over the years, the construction of the enemies' identities played specific roles depending on the context and the need to maintain the state's victimhood image. For example, at the helm of the anti-colonial struggles and the emergence of national liberation movements in the region, Israel's enemy needed to have a national and ethnic identity, and Arab nations and ethnicities fit the profile well. These dynamics began to shift in the late 70s after the Camp David Accords, where Israel needed to find another enemy to justify the continuation of its settler colonial agenda. As Islam and Muslims have long been constructed as enemies of the West, they also became easy

targets for Israel's continued propaganda project. What works in Israel's favour in this iteration of colonial propaganda is that the majority of Palestinians are Muslims and there is a deep significance of Palestine in Islam. However, part of the manipulation of this narrative serves to homogenize Palestinians as entirely Muslims and erase the significance of Palestine to Christians as well, or to Palestinian Jews for that matter. We argue that this is exactly why the settler colonial project of Zionism in Palestine needs to be interrogated for its characterization as a religious conflict. By framing the occupation as a 'conflict between Jews and Muslims', Zionism seeks to mask Jewish settlement in Palestine as a colonial occupation of Palestinian land, instead, affirming the false claim that the holy land belongs to all Jews, and Muslims have simply been fighting over its ownership. While Islam has certainly taken shape in various ways long before the Zionist colonial project in Palestine, Zionist discourses and propaganda against the struggle for Palestinian liberation served to further the hegemony of the 'religious war' narrative used by Israel, especially in recent years. For example, the most recent siege on Gaza is being excused under the guise that Israel is chasing out the so-called extremist Islamic militants whose existence is posed as a threat to the safety of Jewish people, a discourse that many Jewish activists, scholars and community organizations have rejected by vocalizing «not in our name». In fact, we continue to see the weaponization of antisemitism to accelerate the settler colonial project in the name of Jews, masking its true intentions of genocide and ethnic cleansing if ever possible, a complete annihilation of Palestinian people.

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The occupation of Palestine and the genocide of its people demonstrates the dark side of organized religion; a testament to how the ethno-religious Zionist settler state of Israel wields Judaism to genocide an indigenous population while simultaneously using religious propaganda to brainwash its own settlers and sympathizers. We wish to emphasize that Palestinians are multiplicitous in their faith and the existence of Israel relies on the conflation of Palestinians as Muslims, which erases the existence of Palestinian Christians and Jews. As the ongoing genocide continues to unfold, there may be reconstructions of Palestinians as enemies; however, the use of religion to justify the murder of indigenous peoples will remain a long-standing colonial tactic for years to come. As such, we argue that the ongoing occupation of Palestine and genocide of Palestinians needs to be unpacked for its use of religious propaganda and the organization of Jewish-masked Zionist claims to the land.

As we witness the ongoing genocide unfolding in Palestine, the Imperial Western agenda maintains its focus on characterizing Israel's colonial violence as an ethno-religious conflict. Reckoning with all these ongoing struggles against imperialist interests requires a global liberation movement that calls into question the ongoing weaponization of religion used to disguise settler colonialism. As we

grapple with the continued complicity of imperial powers, we are glued to news updates that keep us swinging between a glimmer of hope and so much despair for the future of this world. From the global student movement calling out the genocide and the Western complicity in its manufacturing, to the failed coup attempt in Congo, or the accident (or maybe not) that claimed the life of the Iranian President and his company, the stability of the world remains at stake. Imperialism and the settler colonial agenda will continue to mask their interests however they see fit, and the onus will continue to fall on peoples with consciousness to resist and reject the claims that weaponize belief systems to facilitate occupation and colonial wars. There is a place for faith in these conversations; faith encourages us to think about how to be the best we can be to support one another, fostering solidarity, relationships and community, while reaching our potential as people within and through the spaces we occupy in this life. We remain hopeful that this manifests in ways that bolster our commitments to humanity and social justice while building up societies of love and rejecting all forms of human-made settler colonialism and imperialism. We have critical hope for the collective capacities of faith and decolonial love to crumble the empire and dismantle settler colonial systems of complicity.