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Effective Both-Siderism in the Midst of a Genocide: Whiplash Pedagogy on Israel-Palestine

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Abstract

This essay examines a unique, high-stakes pedagogical initiative undertaken at the University of Notre Dame following the October 7, 2023 attacks, initiated in response to campus tensions and student protests. The provost of the University, in response to student protests and a commitment made by the University's president, invited a Muslim professor of global affairs sympathetic to the pro-Palestine movement to co-lead a year-long campus-wide Israel/Palestine series in partnership with a Jewish colleague who identifies as a liberal Zionist. Both professors were trained in religious studies, one specializing in Islam and the other in Judaism. The essay shares the dilemmas, challenges, and successes of hosting such a series at a time when constructive public engagement on Israel/Palestine had become next to impossible. The essay is a case-study in what might be called "whiplash pedagogy," where students are invited to go back and forth between contested and perhaps irreconcilable narratives. The essay explains the pedagogical choices made, speakers invited, texts selected, and partners engaged for dialogue/encounter, as well as lessons learned through the overall reception of the series from a diverse campus community and selectively invited public audience.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, Gaza, genocide, Agonistic Pedagogy, Narrative Empathy, polarization

On the morning of October 7, I was scheduled to have breakfast with Daniel Schwake, the director of Notre Dame Jerusalem, the University's campus located in the Holy Land. He was visiting South Bend to meet with the directors of the University's various global centers. "You don't know what happened," he asked, astonished, as he climbed into the car. He had not slept all night. The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023 had actually commenced on October 6, 11:30 pm Eastern Time in the United States. I had not checked the news since the night before. The situation was still fluid when we sat down for breakfast. Hamas was active within Israel, moving from settlement to settlement through the borderlands adjacent to the Gaza Strip. Though nobody could predict how things would eventually unfold, people familiar with the region knew that the world had changed forever.

After the weekend on Monday, I discussed the need to issue a statement with my dean and senior colleagues at the Keough School for Global Affairs. As executive director of the Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion, I felt we should say something. With no interest from the leadership to enter the public conversation at such an uncertain moment—a wise move in hindsight—I decided to issue a statement on behalf of the Ansari Institute. Our statement, published on October 11, was brief: "The Ansari Institute grieves the loss of innocent life in Israel and Gaza."[1] Instead of elaborating further, we invited our audience to ponder thoughtful statements made by other credible organizations. Our page became a kind of "statement on statements," with links to leading peacebuilding, human rights, and academic institutions. The first of these was a thoughtful statement issued by Notre Dame's president, Fr. John Jenkins, CSC. I chose carefully.

We also featured statements from Religions for Peace, Jewish Voice for Peace, Churches for Middle East Peace, Amnesty International, and the American Association for Colleges & Universities (AAUP). Each was a thoughtful invitation to pray for the innocents and for seeking better understanding for the causes of the violence. In response, we received three extremely angry comments from respected members of the Jewish community complaining about the inclusion of Jewish Voice for Peace. They argued that the group is a fringe element, non-representative of American Jewry, and that "both-siderism" was not helpful at a moment when Jews were confronting the most heinous assault since the Holocaust. In the four-day

1 "Statements Calling for Peace, Justice and Understanding," Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion, University of Notre Dame, October 11, 2023, https://ansari.nd.edu/news-events/news/statements-calling-for-peace-justice-and-understanding/.

period between October 7–11, Israel had already killed as many Palestinians in Gaza as Hamas had in their attacks, with reports of another 5,000 Palestinians having been injured. These numbers rose dramatically in the weeks and months to follow.

While I was shocked at the one-sided demand for acknowledging harm committed against Israelis with a total lack of concern for Palestinians, I considered it unhelpful at the time to compare. I sat with the pain of my Jewish friends and colleagues, grieving the real losses and the trauma they had endured, on its own terms. After all, if one person loses a loved one, it does not help to simply point to another who has also suffered a similar loss, or a far graver loss. Empathy that is instrumentalized, that seeks reciprocity, cannot be genuine. I sought to be genuine in my solidarity with my Jewish friends and colleagues.

The first Friday after October 7, the Imam of our local mosque, the Islamic Society of Michiana, invited me to lead the Friday prayer. In the sermon, I led with the pain of the Palestinians. That was my community. I acknowledged the horror of seventy years of occupation and displacement, life in Gaza as an "open-air prison," the periodic bombing of Gaza for two decades, which Israeli leaders referred to as "mowing-the-lawn," and the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza that was by then underway, which had already displaced or killed the relatives of many of our own community members.[2] Grown men, strong men, wept in the front row. As I concluded, I invited the congregation to open its heart, to hold the same pain for Israeli children, as we prayed for Israelis to hold the same pain in their hearts for Palestinians. If we couldn't bring ourselves to do that, there was no hope for the future.

That summer, after a contentious year on campus involving protests, op-eds, and arrests, Fr. Bob Dowd, the university's newly appointed president, announced the theme for his first Notre Dame Forum, a campus-wide series sponsored by the president's office, "What do we owe each other?"[3] The series was ideal to constructively engage the situation the Holy Land in the aftermath of October 7:

2 Human Rights Watch, "Gaza: Israel's 'Open-Air Prison' at 15," June 14, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/14/gaza-israels-open-air-prison-15; "The history of Israel 'mowing the grass' in Gaza," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/14/israel-gaza-history/.

3 "About," *What do We Owe Each Other*, Notre Dame Forum 2024, University of Notre Dame, https://forum2024.nd.edu/about/.

> With a growing and often welcome emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, how should we—individually and collectively—think about our responsibilities to one another? In a world where ideological and cultural divisions seem to have deepened and wars in Ukraine, Israel/Gaza, and elsewhere have caused such terrible suffering, how can we bring people together to face the challenges of our times? How can Catholic social thought help us engage in fruitful dialogue with those whose perspectives are different from our own, bridge social divides, and promote healing in the midst of suffering, division, and injustice?[4]

On July 2, our provost, John McGreevy, invited me to join Tzvi Novick, a professor in the Department of Theology, to co-lead a campus-wide Israel/Palestine series in the coming academic year. Tzvi and I have known each other since our doctoral studies at Yale. We are both primarily trained in what is called "text study," the close reading and interpretation of premodern religious literature, including our sacred scriptures. Although we are literate in the broad history of the Middle East, from ancient times to the present, neither he nor I are experts on the Israel/Palestine conflict. Tzvi is a theologian who sees Israel as the realization of the national aspiration of Jewish people, and a refuge for Jews in the shadow of the history of antisemitism. He is a liberal Zionist. I am a professor of religion and global affairs who identifies with the global Muslim Ummah, aligned with the "free Palestine" movement.

I had every reason to decline: I was not "an expert;" I was not Palestinian; I was afraid to stick my neck out, putting my reputation and career on the line, for what was sure to be a thankless job; was it even a good idea to be in public dialogue with "the other side" in the midst of what an increasing number of observers were calling an active genocide?[5] On the other hand, this was a golden opportunity to center the question of Palestine at the highest forum of the University: the Notre Dame Forum, sponsored by the president's office. The provost extended the invitation to Tzvi and me on Zoom. Tzvi immediately accepted. In the blink of an eye, I followed suit.

Over the next two months, we designed a one-credit undergraduate class, offered in both the fall and the spring, open for audit to the entire Notre Dame community. We conceived six public events to be included in

4 "About," *What do We Owe Each Other*.

5 Raz Segal, "Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine since 7 October," *Contending Modernities*, December 9, 2023, https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/.

the public Forum, three in the fall and three in the spring. We hosted private meetings for students and faculty over coffee, breakfast, and dinner around each of the Forums. Our class zoomed with Jewish Israeli settlers and Palestinian students living under occupation in the West Bank. We traveled to the Vatican for dialogue with Jews and Palestinians living in Israel and East Jerusalem. Where do I begin to share the lessons we learned?

The Class

The undergraduate class enrolled thirty-nine students in the fall and thirty-five in the spring. Their backgrounds were diverse. Among them were American and international, Catholic and Muslim, Israeli and Palestinian, hailing from the global North and South. Some had been arrested in the spring campus protests. Others had expressed fear of the protests. Our approach in the class was neither to reach agreement nor to push for disagreement. It was to sit honestly and deeply with perspectives that were in genuine tension.

Discussions in the fall semester revolved around a single text, Sandy Tolan's *The Lemon Tree*.[6] Tolan presents the story of Bashir Khayri, a young boy ethnically cleansed from his home in Ramla in 1948, one moment in an event the Palestinians remember as the Nakba, or Catastrophe. Bashir's home, built stone-by-stone by his father with his own hands, was taken over by the Jewish Eshkenazi family from Bulgaria, one among many such families arriving in droves into the fledgling state of Israel in search of refuge from the horrors of the Holocaust. Their infant girl Dalia Eshkenazi grew up in the Khayri home.

The book opens with a touching scene in 1967. Dalia, now a young woman, must decide whether to let Bashir, who shows up without notice at the door, into their home. Tolan leaves the reader on a cliffhanger after the first chapter, returning to this moment in the narrative nine chapters later. Along the way, he takes the reader on an agonizing journey through the lives of Dalia and Bashir, and the contending histories of their peoples, leading up to this moment. Having read each narrative on its own terms—the dreams of the young Khayri family shattered by the birth of Israel, the life of the young Dalia, nearly extinguished in Europe, saved by that very same event—the reader is incapable of rooting against either Bashir or Dalia. The two end up developing an unlikely yet profound friendship, but they never

6 Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew, and the Heart of the Middle East* (Bloomsbury, 2006).

reconcile their divergent experiences or perspectives on the past or the future of Israel and Palestine.

During the fall semester, Tzvi and I invited two graduate students into the classroom—one a leader in the campus pro-Palestine movement, another an Israeli international student from Jerusalem enrolled in peace studies—to engage in dialogue with each other and the class. One of the most remarkable moments in the year came in response to this dialogue when one of the undergraduates who was supporting Israel remarked: "When we saw the pro-Palestine activities from afar, we were afraid. But what I'm hearing from you is completely different. I'd like to talk more." Our approach, which could be called agonistic, enabled the transformation of relations without any expectation of arriving at consensus.[7]

In the spring semester, we decided to pick two different books. The first was Amir Tibon's *The Gates of Gaza*, a play-by-play of October 7 from a safe room in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz on the Israeli side of the border with Gaza.[8] Tibon, a journalist with the liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* whose father was a retired officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, stitches together the harrowing Hamas attack. He reconstructs the attacks both from his own experience, from what his father related to him later, and from contemporaneous accounts that emerged in the aftermath. Tibon gives names to victims, depth to lives, and gut-wrenching depictions of the losses experienced on that day.

The second book was Ahed Tamimi's *They Called Me A Lioness*, a memoir of a Palestinian teenager living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank.[9] Tamimi belongs to the village of Nabi Saleh, whose land and resources are being usurped by Israeli settlers. Her story of resilience under Israeli brutality—the loss of close relatives to gratuitous violence, the dilation of time as bullets whiz by, the repeated raiding of her village and her home, the arbitrary arrest of members of her family, and her own imprisonment—make it impossible to avoid empathizing with the plight of Palestinians.

The alternation between the narratives of Tibon and Tamimi is what I call "whiplash pedagogy," empathy swaying from one side to the other, but

7 Emma Murphy and Maria Prada Ramírez, *Guide to Agonistic Pedagogy: A Tool for a Transitional Justice*, version 1, CurateND, University of Notre Dame, published January 29, 2026, https://doi.org/10.7274/31100923.v1.

8 Amir Tibon, *The Gates of Gaza: A Story of Love, Loss, and Faith in Israel's Borderlands* (Little, Brown and Company, 2024).

9 Ahed Tamimi and Dena Takruri, *They Called Me a Lioness: A Palestinian Girl's Fight for Freedom* (One World, 2022).

not entirely at the expense of the other. Even in the charged narratives of Tibon and Tamimi, one glimpses the humanity of the other. Tamimi's account portrays Jewish allies on the front lines with the Palestinian villagers, using their privilege to shield the persecuted, becoming part of their family. Tibon's account, rather, the very title of his book, is based on a speech by an Israeli general, Moshe Dayan, recognizing the humanity of his enemy, in a speech he delivered in 1956: "Why should we question their burning hatred for us? For eight years, they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes, we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate."[10]

Although each text provided the necessary historical context, it went beyond chronology. We found ourselves immersed in "dynamic narratives," which "offer complex judgement, plot, character, and value assessments of the world thus encouraging more openness to others."[11] Tzvi and I were open to any and all questions; we offered modest framing comments to start each class, followed by a free-flowing discussion about the readings in tandem with the daily headlines of the Israeli annihilation of Gaza in response to the Hamas attacks of October 7.

The Notre Dame Forum

Our philosophy for these public forums was to invite experts aligned with different sides of the conflict who could nonetheless talk to each other. We bookended the series with Hussein Ibish, a Lebanese American and senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute, and David Myers, a Jewish American and Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History at UCLA. They began looking backward in time, contextualizing the October 7 attacks within the broader history of the Israel/Palestine conflict. They closed the series looking forward in an event that is best captured through its title, "The Ever-Vanishing Horizon toward a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine." The four programs between these two featured joint Israeli/Palestinian grassroots peacebuilding efforts, a diverse to the point of chaotic Notre Dame faculty panel, Catholic perspectives on Israel-Palestine, and pressing questions on

10 Tibon, *The Gates of Gaza*, 27.

11 Nadya Hajj, "*Shinrin yoku* as a Pedagogy for Peace Amidst Violence: Generating Dynamic Narratives of Palestine-Israel Relations on College Campuses," *Journal of Peace Education* 20, no. 3 (2023): 291–315.

international law. All of these events can be viewed on the Notre Dame Forum website.[12]

In the fall, the speakers we invited were reluctant to use the word genocide, though they freely described Israel's campaign as "genocidal," using terms such as "war crimes," "ethnic cleansing," and "crimes against humanity." In the spring, particularly at the international law event, all three scholars—Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim—said that while they had previously been reluctant to use the term genocide, it had by then become impossible to no longer characterize what was happening in Gaza as a genocide. Sadly, by then, many members of the pro-Palestine movement had boycotted the forum because of their principled objection to the "both-siderism" it represented. I even received emails from students accusing me of being complicit in genocide for having agreed to co-lead the series.

Takeaways

Arguably, the Israel/Palestine series at Notre Dame would not have happened without the student protestors who applied pressure on the administration to address the issue. Although the series fell far short of their expectations and demands, which included divestment from funds that profit from war, not everyone felt that way. The protest-camp was divided; not only did some of them enroll in the one-credit class, many continued to attend the series, and the final event platformed student leaders of the pro-Palestine movement at the University's highest forum, where they read a prepared statement about their stance from the podium.

Parallel to our "both-sides" series that was sponsored by the University administration, whose primary purpose was "literacy," students and faculty who identify as non-Zionist continued to organize events that could be characterized as "advocacy." I'd like to emphasize that literacy and advocacy do not form a neat binary; one bleeds into the other and both can be equally intellectually rigorous. From my side, I promoted and attended all of the events, which included lectures by Peter Beinart, Raz Segal, and Rev. Munther Isaac, as well as the screening of the film "No Other Land," which took place on campus, coincidentally, just two days before it earned an academy award. Although my personal ostracization from these circles was painful, I do not begrudge their principled energy and focus. Perhaps this is how it is meant to be: Without them, the campus-wide series would have

12 "Israel-Palestine Series: Past Events," Notre Dame Forum, University of Notre Dame, https://forum2024.nd.edu/israel-palestine-series/past/.

never come about, and without me, such a series would not have a partner to bring the voices of Palestinians from the margins to the center.

A key ingredient of the series was my partnership with Tzvi. He genuinely did his best to listen to my point of view, as I did his. We did not reach an agreement on the path forward, but we saw each other's humanity, and we sat authentically in public dialogue with the problem. Though we did not know it at the time, our pedagogical experiment has precedence as an "approach to peacebuilding [that] involves a partnership between educators from both sides of a conflict."[13] Tzvi may characterize the year differently from how I have here, so this essay is not meant to speak for him.[14] While the public events were restricted to the campus community, we were at liberty to extend personal invitations to community partners, including members of the Jewish Federation, the Islamic Society of Michiana, and the United Religious Community of St. Joseph County. We were gratified to learn that the few who attended felt their perspectives were well represented, on both sides, for the most part.

A Theological Perspective

Let me close with a personal reflection. While it is possible to justify opposing doctrines in Islam with respect to armed Jihad, resistance, and rebellion, an overwhelming consensus prevails that if, according to rational assessment, the resulting harm is likely to exceed the benefit, then it is better to bear oppression with patience until the circumstances change. Vigilante violence is categorically forbidden in the presence of lawful ruling authorities. This is one reason why many Arab rulers are unable to support Palestinian resistance, because the resistance movements have already qualified the rulers as being illegitimate. Be that as it may, the limiting condition remains: A drastic asymmetry in power renders armed resistance too costly. Moreover, such resistance necessitates the suspension of first-order ethics that forbid the targeting of innocents.

There is a saying of the prophet Muhammad: "Whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right with his hand, let him do so; if he can't, then with his tongue; if he can't, then with [or in] his heart, which is the bare

13 "Team-Teaching Conflict,"Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM), University of Maryland, https://cidcm.umd.edu/research/team-teaching-conflict.

14 See response from Tzvi Novick at end of this article.

minimum of faith" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 49).[15] Although this saying has spawned a variety of interpretive doctrines—so the position I offer is by no means universal—it has been held that to command right with the hand is the prerogative of the ruler; to command right with the tongue is the obligation of scholars; and to feel badly about the wrong in the heart, suffering silently, is the responsibility of the powerless multitudes, unless they can bring about change without causing more harm than the harm they aspire to alleviate. When the powerless take it upon themselves to command right with the hand, more often than not, neither peace nor justice is achieved. It only causes more harm because it leads to a breakdown of order, no matter how tyrannical. Such a position, which favors suffering in silence until God brings about a better day, follows the political maxim: A day of anarchy is worse than sixty years of tyranny.[16]

Let me take it a step further by invoking the following Quranic verse: "When the angels take the souls of those who have wronged themselves, they ask them, 'What circumstances were you in?' They reply, 'We were oppressed in this land,' and the angels say, 'But was God's earth not spacious enough for you to migrate to some other place?'" (Q. 4:97) The immediate context of the verse is the emigration of the prophet Muhammad and his Companions from Mecca to Medina. Abstracting it from its historic context, we might ask, how does it apply today? If a people can resist oppression only by committing heinous crimes, then are they not wronging themselves? I refuse to accept the proposition that oppressed peoples have no agency. The occupied have the right, under international law, to resist their occupiers militarily. But they do not have the right to target civilians, nor to invite overwhelming force against their own peoples in order to earn widespread sympathy in order to win a war of narratives.

Scriptural guidance is unambiguous: "God's earth is vast." Prophets migrate to other lands, where they make new homes or return to fight another day.

"No justice, no peace" is not, according to this theology, a practical slogan, for, an inability to achieve justice leads only to a world in perpetual violence. Justice and peace, at times, lead to different places. Those in power are the ones holding the gavel of justice, and, with their virtue, they are the ones with the agency to create the conditions for just peace. The oppressed,

15 See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 33.

16 Noah Feldman, "Luncheon Speech: Better Sixty Years of Tyranny than One Night of Anarchy," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review* 31, no. 1 (2009): 143–155.

on the other hand, with their patient perseverance, hold the keys to what is called "negative peace." Negative peace is the absence of direct violence, though the forms of violence, cultural and structural, are still present. Those who are subject to indirect forms of violence may seek ways to shift the balance of power in their favor, but they are not permitted to act "by any means necessary."

The political theology of peacemaking I am expressing was articulated after October 7, 2023 by the Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal.[17] In his statement, while he affirmed Hamas's right to resist the occupation militarily, he condemned them for the targeting of innocent civilians, thereby giving Israel an excuse to obliterate Gaza. At the same time, Prince Turki condemned Israel for its historic crimes against the Palestinians and for the ongoing campaign of ethnic cleansing since 1948. And he condemned Western politicians for valuing Western and Israeli lives over Arab and Palestinian lives. "There are no heroes in this conflict," he concluded, "only victims."

If a certain kind of religion has brought us to the edge of the abyss, then another kind of religion has the power to turn us around. The way forward requires each side to look inward, to find non-exclusive resources in their traditions that others can affirm, and to hold incommensurable narratives of exile together, without pitting one against another. The story of Israelis, their national aspirations, their history of annihilation and survival, has to be acknowledged alongside the story of ethnic cleansing, occupation, and genocide of the Palestinians, in all its depth and fullness. This class allowed me to grow in ways that would not have been possible in one-sided discourses that make maximalist demands while categorically condemning others by flattening their stories. Absolutism generates binaries: this but not that. To transcend the binary, we must learn to live with both this and that. The first step toward healing and reconciliation—whatever unknown destination that will eventually lead to—will be marked by developing this formidable capacity, which I can only characterize as spiritual.

Tzvi Novick Response

Reading Mahan's essay revived in me the complex mixture of feelings that accompanied me throughout our joint undertaking: the pleasure of working with so generous and incisive an educator as Mahan, the weight of the

17 Frank Gardner, "Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal Condemns Both Hamas and Israel," *BBC News*, October 20, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67177684.

terrible violence that we were setting before students, and most of all, a sense of constriction or constraint surrounding the act of speech, a sense that every word that I might say, every silence that I might keep, was fraught. To say everything at once was as urgently important as it was impossible.

There are serious drawbacks to a narrative-based pedagogy. No one tells or focalizes her own story objectively; individual stories can be representative in some ways but not in others; a reader can be led to moral judgements that are insufficiently refined for lack of necessary context. Our contributions to class discussion were designed in part to address these drawbacks. Might we have done better to dispense with the narratives and our supplements and instead allow in only the voice of the historian or sociologist, to make objectivity our goal?

I think that what enabled our "whiplash pedagogy," our two-story solution, to work to the degree that it did is that neither Mahan nor I is disinterested, and that our personal allegiance to our respective "side" is rooted in considerations of identity and religion and not, per se, in the justice of our side's cause, even as the allegiance presumes a just foundation, and even as actions undertaken by our side can alienate us from it to the degree that they are unjust. Leveraged by the competing narratives that we assigned, our different allegiances—our prejudices—invited students to acknowledge the simple fact of the existence and persistence of two sides, neither of them remotely unsullied, but both compelling enough to command the attachment, to some degree, of reasonable, reasonably well-informed, and reasonably good people. My conviction is that the current situation—now decades old, and in important ways never worse—will not reach a solution except insofar as we, as an international community and as affiliates of the two sides, keep this fact in the forefront of our minds, and cultivate it as a starting point.

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