

Mitri Raheb: Decolonize Palestine. A Critique of Western Theological Dominance in the Middle East.

Reviewed by the Editor

Author Mitri Raheb is a pastor at the Lutheran "Christmas Church" in Bethlehem – and founder and driving force behind Dar Kalima University, an educational institution working across religions to support and strengthen Palestinian culture. (Dar Kalima's Gaza branch was obliterated by Israeli precision bombing on April 1st, along with Al Shifa Hospital, while this review was in progress). He is the author of several works, including "Faith and Empire," which deals with the relationship of Christians to power in the same context as "Decolonize Palestine," but from a slightly different angle.

The book is highly recommended. For some, it prompts reconsideration of positions regarding the Israel-Palestine relationship—where did one's opinions actually come from? For others, it encourages a more globally informed theological approach to the Bible, viewing it as a guide and inspiration without being oppressive. (Here, the reviewer is challenged each time—by figures such as Desmond Tutu or Mitri Raheb himself). Finally, there is a wealth of quotes documenting the analyses and history from the early days of Zionism to the present.

Ideological and Theological Critique

The book is an ideological and theological critique—rooted in a concrete historical narrative in a beleaguered region of the world, Palestine. It sheds light on the series of events in history that have led to the current situation and their ideological background, including Zionism, both Jewish and Christian. For most readers, there will be surprising knowledge and insights to gain. It works to provide us with adequate concepts to understand the conflict unfolding in its most gruesome form in Gaza. It should be noted that it was written before the terrorist act on October 7th and the completely disproportionate counter-terrorism that followed. For those who did not closely follow this corner of the world, it opens eyes to how beleaguered the Palestinians were even before—in their own land.

The Key Concept of Settler Colonialism

A key concept in the book is the relatively new term "settler colonialism." One form of colonialism involved European powers taking control of areas outside Europe militarily and using that control to extract resources and wealth from the colonies. Some settlers also established themselves as owners of various businesses, with the local population as workers. Settler colonialism is when the local population is displaced to make room for new immigrants who take over both land and work. The book compares the outright settler colonialism in Israel with various others—including the colonization of America,

which shares similarities in some aspects, and shows how many Americans easily identify with Israel.

Early Christian Zionism

One of the things that actually surprised me during reading was how strongly theology in the last century was oriented towards Zionism in general. And how much further back Christian Zionism partly laid the groundwork for the Jewish one. From the late 1800s, the book shows, it was not only Germany and the Nazis talking about "the Jewish problem." Even in England, the political architects behind the promise of a homeland for the Jews saw the issue as a problem. And Zionism was a convenient solution, united with the general, obvious colonialist attitude that one could take a land, conquer it as one's own, and do with it as one pleased, here creating a nation-state for Jews. And the deeply devout, political leaders in England laid the groundwork for statehood. A Balfour was one of them. He lent his name to the declaration that gave Jews the right to "establish a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. Not entirely without consideration for a population that was already there. But they were at one point, when they probably constituted 90%, exclusively defined negatively in relation to the Jewish people. "Non-Jewish communities" were not to be prejudiced in terms of rights and political status, the declaration states. These English top politicians fully embraced the Zionist idea (or rather had it themselves), that Jews - of all nationalities otherwise - are the same people as Israelites and Judeans, who in very different compositions lived in Palestine 2000 years ago—and that Jews, regardless of background, had the right to settle there and have a state.

Christian Zionism After the Holocaust

Next, I hadn't quite seen how much Christian Zionism dominated Protestant theology in Europe even later. Raheb talks about respected theologians. Suffused with guilt over the Holocaust, which only a few shining examples in the churches had distanced themselves from, resolutions were passed about Israel's divine right to exist, etc.—without many words being spent on the Palestinians' corresponding right to their own land. Protestant biblicism accepted that the Bible should/could be understood in terms of relationships 2000 years after the last scriptures were written. A simple historical consciousness was suspended.

I wondered here this spring, when Mitri Raheb, in his disappointment over the lack of solidarity from the other Lutheran churches during the Gaza terror and the general oppression in Palestine, considered proposing that the Lutheran Palestinian Church should withdraw from the communion of the Eucharist with the Lutheran churches in Europe. It has not done so. But I understand it now. Like theologians in the Protestant church, I first have a guilty conscience on behalf of our culture, that the Holocaust could happen at all. Now I have a real guilty conscience that we as churches have not clearly been able to stand up for a massively oppressed people, and influenced and made more aware of what has long been happening. So I understand Raheb's cry for help.

Political Use of the Bible

In addition to being relevant for understanding Zionism and Western power, the book is relevant for theologians and others to consider how a sacred text, the Bible, can be used in a political context. For a majority of Danes, it is not a problematic issue to consider, as they are far from thinking that the Bible as such should be relevant to them or knowing that the Bible, by virtue of being a solid part of our common cultural foundation, influences our actions, including political ones. But the issue can become more apparent even in a Danish context, because more and more people are influenced by a primitive-atheistic understanding: the Christians are fundamentalists, and they hear nothing else when priests and theologians speak. And it can become so because the small fundamentalist segment actually becomes larger and more vociferous.

For Danish mainstream priests (whoever they may be), it may not actually be a problem. In short: They will argue that Jesus Christ is the center of our faith, the New Testament is the interpretation of his significance, the Old Testament tells of the religious context in which he emerged and which he and his first followers understood as background. The individual scriptures are determined by the historical context in which they were created. For most faith communities around the world, the Bible is more than that, it is more directly normative for us even now—across all time and space. Therefore, Raheb works a lot with what is wrong, historically unfounded fundamentalism—through his own use, and by pointing out misuse, and by pointing out two very different directions in the Bible and then through three Palestinian theologians' different, more theoretical perspectives on the matter.

The Concept of being chosen

His work with the concept of "chosenness" (a chosen people) shows some of this. Dryly, he can be quoted as believing that these Palestinian colleagues "do not give sufficient attention to the Bible's own sociopolitical context" and turn the concept into dogma (which, however, is better than the Zionist approach of skipping over all history). At the same time, the idea of chosenness should not be taken away from Jews, Christians, or Muslims, so: "Just as a lover cannot help but see their beloved as 'the one and only,' unique and special, 'the lily among flowers,' the believer cannot help but see their connection to God as unique and to some extent exclusive" (p. 139). The danger in a religious context is to make such statements of faith objective or absolute—outside of historical context. Raheb shows how the concept of chosenness is dangerous, how it can mean violence and annihilation of others, already in the Old Testament; how this permeates various places in the Bible. Jesus has a completely different perspective—chosenness is not about a people, a geopolitical entity, but the individual in their relationship with God, and thus in relation to everyone else, creating a completely different kind of people. But the concept of chosenness in its old form before Jesus is carried forward into various versions later in history. It comes through, for example, in the

American right's self-understanding of America as the new Israel (p. 136)—but it has been a part of European expansion history in many places.

Kristen Skriver Frandsen. April 2024.

***Note on the understanding of the Bible**

It may seem less relevant for the Danish priest at home in the study, but we are part of a larger church. The understanding of the Bible was one of the things that Phil Jenkins pointed out in his book *The New Christianity* as being different in the young, independent, growing churches in the South. It is not fundamentalist, but the Bible as a whole is somehow a natural normative and guiding companion. It is for Desmond Tutu, who despite this, may believe that marriages between homosexuals should of course have church blessing, so he does not interpret it fundamentallistic like many right-wing Christians.

Bible Indexing

Theol-p has created a Bible index for the book. With the purpose that relevant quotes can easily be found for the resource and inspiration material "The text this week" – week by week. It will appear in the relevant place in the accumulated indexes for each of the Bible's scriptures. For the first time on Theol-p, also organized in the order of the quotes in the book. With a small heading for each reference, you get an overview of the sequence of Bible usage, but also quite a bit of an overview of some of the content of the book.

Bible index for Mitri Raheb: Decolonize Palestine Bible index (simple) for Mitri Raheb: Faith and Empire.