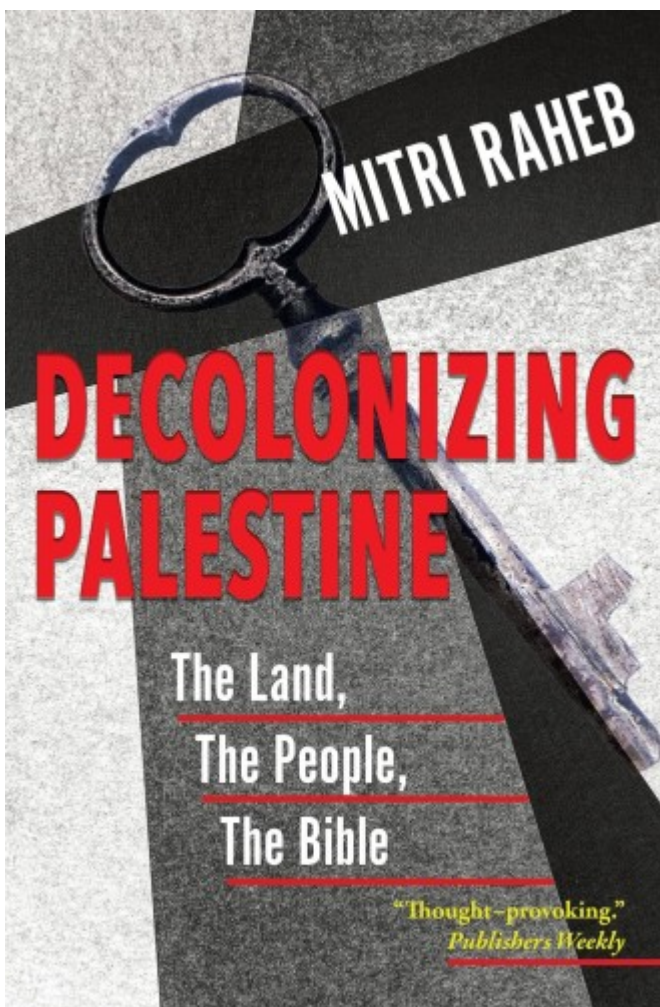


Mitri Raheb takes on Christian Zionists (even the liberal ones)

The Palestinian theologian challenges Christians to examine their feelings about Israel—and to ask what their faith has to do with these feelings.

by [Emilee Walker-Cornetta](#) in the [May 2024](#) issue

## In Review



## Decolonizing Palestine

The Land, the People, the Bible

By Mitri Raheb

Last fall, several weeks into Israel's bombardment of Gaza, I participated in an interfaith press conference calling for a cease-fire. After the event, one of the organizers, a longtime Jewish peace activist, thanked me for coming and shared that as the weeks went on, she'd been asking herself with growing anger, "Where are the White Christians?" She observed that the White Christian clergy she'd grown accustomed to seeing at interfaith gatherings for peace and justice had grown strangely silent after October 7. Our absence, she said, was conspicuous.

Historically, White mainline Protestants have not hesitated to engage moments like these. For the past century, often in the pages of this magazine, they have publicly disputed questions related to Judaism, Zionism, and the state of Israel. They have argued about whether the United States should enter World War II and whether it should open its borders to Jewish refugees fleeing Europe, whether Christians should support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestinian lands, whether Israel should be criticized for the displacement and suffering of Palestinians, and whether political anti-Zionism is inherently antisemitic. These conversations reveal a wide spectrum of positions, particularly before the late 1960s, when US public opinion firmly settled in favor of Israel. All together, they communicate a common investment on the part of mainline Protestants in the fate of the Holy Land, its people, and its relationship to our lives together here in the United States.

In *Decolonizing Palestine*, Palestinian Lutheran pastor and theologian Mitri Raheb draws a bold line connecting the settler colonialism of Western Christendom with the application of Zionism in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Unlike "classical" colonialism, which establishes colonies primarily to extract wealth, settler colonialism systematically dispossesses Indigenous peoples of their lands and resources in order to establish a new society. To this end, it employs political, legal, and ideological strategies that portray settlers as rightful inhabitants of the land and Indigenous peoples as extraneous. Indigenous resistance to this project of elimination is held up as evidence that native populations represent an imminent threat to the state's security and must be aggressively subdued.

Building on a body of scholarship that characterizes Israel as a settler colonial state, Raheb examines how the theological language that animated Western settler

colonialism has been critical to the success of Israel's conquest and occupation of the land of Palestine. Early Zionist settlers claimed a divine right to the land by identifying themselves with biblical Israelites entering the land of Canaan, and agreement with this claim is the foundation upon which much Christian support for the state of Israel stands. Raheb asks us to consider the centuries of history this identification blurs and to situate it as part of a Western European tradition that uses colonial readings of the Bible (the Pentateuch and Joshua in particular) to justify conquest and domination. "No one should be allowed to use 'biblical rights' to violate human rights," he summarily contends.

While the term *settler colonialism* may be new to some readers, the notion that Israel benefits from the theology of an influential subset of Western Christians is certainly not. Indeed, the belief that God is using the state of Israel to usher in the end times is so common that the US-based group Christians United for Israel claims more than 10 million members. Interestingly, Raheb expands the boundaries of Christian Zionism to include anyone whose political support for the state of Israel is informed by their Christian faith. To define Christian Zionism in terms of biblical literalism, dispensationalism, or a particular prophetic imagination, he warns, is to minimize a complex, global phenomenon whose manifestations vary by context. What Christian Zionists hold in common, Raheb suggests, is a felt connection to the state of Israel and an intuitive sense that in today's battles—be they cultural, political, or cosmic—Israel, like them, is on the right side of history.

In the United States, Raheb sees a nation deeply identified with its settler colonial past. He argues that it is this deep, if unacknowledged, identification that sustains much of the American public's unequivocal support of Israel. Mainline Protestants are no exception, he argues, and he points to the work of Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Paul van Buren, and Walter Brueggemann as examples of Christian Zionism in the liberal theological tradition. (Raheb's case would have been strengthened by a discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr, who made consistent, thoughtful arguments in support of Zionism.)

This reframing of Christian Zionism challenges progressive Christians who have never identified with the term to examine their feelings about Israel and to ask what their faith has to do with these feelings. It holds a more specific challenge to White progressive Christians who are reckoning with our tradition's histories of genocide and enslavement and dispelling the theology that upheld these systems of domination. Raheb asks for theological consistency: if you are willing to challenge

the afterlives of colonialism in your own contexts, then challenge its present-day life in the Palestinian territories, where violent attacks on Palestinians and land theft proceed at an alarming pace.

Since October, as weeks have turned to months and the death toll reported in Gaza exceeds 30,000, many mainline church leaders have called for a cease-fire.

However, others, including those who are deeply committed to social justice, are reluctant to publicly engage. One possible reason for this is the recognition, among progressive Protestants especially, that Jews themselves are victims of a colonizing, supremacist Christian theology. The antisemitism embedded in classical Christian theology has fueled the massacre and displacement of Jewish communities across centuries, culminating in the Holocaust. This is a legacy we are still reckoning with, and there is a need for greater repentance, accountability, and solidarity with our Jewish neighbors, particularly now with antisemitism on the rise.

Raheb urges us to accept that we, as inheritors of Western Christian colonialism and its twisted theology—and as Americans whose tax dollars fund Israeli occupation, settlement expansion, and military operations—are also accountable to Palestinians, who each day of this ongoing assault face the full force of its annihilatory violence.

Some will see an irreconcilable tension between these solidarities, claiming that to embrace one is to betray the other. Raheb, who squarely denounces antisemitism as he critiques Zionism, sometimes reflects this tension. In a section about biblical interpretation he asks urgently, “What is our hermeneutical key: the Holocaust or colonialism?” The key we need now, it seems, is notched by both. Many historians have pointed out that Hitler drew inspiration from scientific models of racism and campaigns of extermination and erasure in North America for his own genocidal designs. Colonialism and antisemitism are two chapters in a centuries-long story of domination and supremacy that continues to destroy our common life and our world. It is this story, still violently unfolding, that we must interrogate and rewrite.

This is not to say all can be easily harmonized or the way forward is simple. Potential risks, conflicts, and missteps abound. The starting point is to acknowledge that we are multiply beholden and to imagine finding a way together in which no people, and no histories of suffering, need be sacrificed.