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**Mitri Raheb. Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. 157.**

[1] The interface between religion and society in the modern state of Israel and the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and Gaza is particularly poignant just now. Because of the smallness of the geographical area and the intensity of recent hostilities there, the uses and abuses of religion stand out in high relief. Our media, print and electronic, testify daily to the abuses: e.g. an a-historical application of Scripture to justify occupation and colonization, on one side, and an elevation of terrorism to the status of martyrdom, on the other. Less noted by our media are the productive "uses" of religion in those troubled parts: e.g. on one side, the members of various Israeli peace groups and the growing number of experienced Israeli military who, on the basis of judgments of conscience formed by their own Judaism, refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories and are willing to risk jail; and on the other side, Palestinians who, on the basis of Muslim or Christian faith, refuse to respond to Israel's occupation with violence, and choose rather to nurture community and work for peace in nonviolent ways. Among the latter is Mitri Raheb.

[2] Raheb is a Palestinian and a Christian pastor who ministers to a Lutheran community in Bethlehem, where his family has lived for hundreds of years. That a Palestinian from an old local family should be a Lutheran calls for some explanation, inasmuch as the majority of Palestinian Christians are exponents of the oldest Christian tradition in Palestine, the Greek Orthodox Church. Raheb's given name, Mitri, is an abbreviated form of the Greek name Demetrius. It was the name of his grandfather, given by his parents at his baptism in the Greek Orthodox Church. Orphaned early, grandfather Mitri Raheb was raised in a Jerusalem orphanage under Lutheran auspices. Because of his experience of Christian charity in that Lutheran community, his grandson, our author Mitri, continued to practice his Christian faith in the Lutheran community and eventually pursued his vocation to the ministry in that tradition. He studied in Germany, where he earned a doctorate from Marburg University. He now serves as pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, where he had served for some ten years prior to the writing of this, his second book. His compound - a complex of offices, meeting rooms, art studios, a gift shop, a church, and the residence for the pastor and his family - sits about three blocks from the ancient Church of the Nativity,

the site of the standoff between Palestinian gunmen inside the church and Israeli forces outside in Manger Square, from April 2 through May 10, 2002.

[3] As autobiography, this book is necessarily anecdotal and episodic. The siege in the title refers, first, to the Israeli siege of the birthplace of Jesus in 2002 between Easter and Ascension Thursday (the literal chronology, quite apart from any symbolic resonance). Second, "besieged" refers as well to the perennial experience of Palestinians since the war of 1967. Accordingly, Raheb presents eighteen episodes in three parts. Part one, "Under Siege," gives five episodes before, during, and after the 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity. (1) "A Monk at the Compound" tells the story of his family's experience at the beginning of the Israeli siege of the whole town of Bethlehem, when Raheb's compound was vandalized and then occupied by 300 Israeli soldiers as their base of operations, until international pressure forced them to vacate the premises two days later. (2) "Challenging yet Transforming the Enemy" details his (successful) efforts to deal with the invaders in a nonviolent way. (3) "Father Amjad and Muhammad under Siege" reports the unfolding of a Good Samaritan relationship between a Franciscan monk and a Hamas gunman during the standoff at the Nativity church. (4) "Though War Rise Up against Me" presents the text of the homily Raheb gave after the six weeks of curfew imposed by the Israelis and his community was allowed to gather in church again. (5) "Obeying Commands or Commandments" alludes to Acts 5:29, the apostles' decision to "obey God rather than any human authority," and recounts his community's meeting for worship in defiance of a curfew imposed some seven months after the lifting of the siege at Manger Square.

[4] Part two, "Life under Occupation," ranges more broadly over the occupation as he has experienced it since its inception during his childhood, presenting a further five episodes to exemplify that experience. (6) "The Land that Swallows its Children" recounts what it is like to grow up under occupation that makes even such normal things as high school graduation and wedding parties sometimes impossible. (7) "A Matter of Life and Death" tells how the inhibiting bureaucracy of the occupying forces kept his family from getting his dying father-in-law to a Jerusalem hospital in time to save his life. (8) "Adventures in Driving" provides some of the inhumane consequences of trying to raise and sustain a family during the seventeen weeks of curfew imposed by the Israelis during 2002-2003. (9) The travails of a Palestinian cleric trying to travel internationally are put forth in "What Would You Do If Your Were in My Shoes?" (10) "Carry On" is a powerful commentary on a painting (reproduced at the head of the chapter) of Suleimon Monsour, The Bearer of Burdens, picturing an old man carrying Jerusalem on his back; this image prompts some of Raheb's most incisive candor, e.g.: "The Holocaust harmed not only the Jewish people but also the Palestinians, who became the victims of the victims . . . The sense of insecurity experienced by European Jews became the golden calf of the Jewish state. As Palestinian people, we are paying the price of this Israeli obsession" (88-89). Here one also encounters strong words for the Christian Right: "I do not find much in them that is Christian or right. They are anxious for Armageddon, no more and no less. They do not even care for Israel itself, but for the final 'big bang'" (90).

[5] Negativity, however, does not dominate these reflections. The third and final section, entitled "Glimpses of Hope," offers eight episodes providing exactly what it promises. (11) "The Light of Right, Not the Power of Might" tells about a courageous candlelight march

during the height of the second Intifada, in December of 2000, involving some 2,500 people, Christian and Muslim, men, women, and children, old and young, walking to signal to a silent world that a mainly peace-loving people were suffering an unjust occupation. (12) "Christ in Palestine" speaks of a gallery project on the theme of "Christ in a Palestinian context," in which sixty percent of the artists who submitted paintings were Muslims; contrary to Muslim practice they dared to portray a biblical figure, and all chose to depict Christ crucified (a heresy in Islam). (13) "Bright Stars" unfolds a project of sports and arts to help Bethlehem's children - ages six to sixteen, Christian and Muslim - to keep their spirits alive in the context of war. (14) "Perplexed but not in Despair" celebrates the remarkable staff of Raheb's center, the ambitious projects they pursue between curfews, and the international network that has developed to support their work. (15) "A Christmas Gift to Bethlehem" tells of a marvelous collaboration between Raheb's community and a Lutheran community in Minneapolis, which managed to get a nineteenth-century Berlin-built organ shipped to Minnesota, where it was repaired and restored, and then shipped back to Bethlehem during the second Intifada in time for the celebration of Christmas of 2000, powered during an outage by a car battery. (16) "Samar" is the story of a 38-year-old Palestinian woman and husband George who, having lost jobs in a textile industry gone bankrupt because the violent Israeli response to the Intifada had discouraged tourism and thus evacuated business, turned to fusing glass angels out of the glass broken from the invasion and, thanks to e-commerce, turning symbols of violence into symbols of hope, thereby recovering their ability to earn a living. (17) "Christmas and the Wall" is essentially a homiletic response to the Israeli-built wall around the city of Bethlehem; Raheb uses Ephesians 2:14, about the death of Jesus breaking down the "wall of hostility" to motivate his congregation to respond nonviolently the frustration created by the physical wall that had turned their town to a prison.

[6] Finally, (18) "Building Walls or Planting Olive Trees?" issues some challenges to all actors in this drama - Israelis, Palestinians, the U.S., Europe, and the larger Arab world - to resist despair, resurrect vision, and act in hope. No one is excluded from Raheb's strong words. Example: "What is the benefit if Israel wins the moral and financial support of the American Jewish community and the Christian right yet loses its Palestinian neighbors? What is the benefit if the Palestinians win the sympathy and support of most of the Arab and Islamic countries and lose their Israeli neighbors? Those supporters pay dollars but make us pay with blood" (155).

[7] For those who are drawn into both the agonies and possibilities evoked by Raheb's experience and analysis, and desire further perspective and clarification, there is a place to go: Raheb's earlier book, *I Am Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). This is a collection of talks and homilies given at local and international conferences during the early 1990s. This volume presents five personal and historical pieces on being a Palestinian Christian, seven reflections gathered under the rubric "On Interpreting the Bible in the Israeli-Palestinian Context," a concluding reflection, "I Have a Dream," and three appendices: "Declaration of Independence of the State of Palestine," "Official Statements by Leaders of the Christian Communities in Jerusalem from the Beginning of the Intifada to the Peace Conference," and the "Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area."

[8] For the student of religion and society looking for ways that faith can supply resources for ending the cycle of violence in Israel-Palestine, these two brief books by Mitri Raheb - *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (1995) and *Bethlehem Besieged* (2004) - provide accessible points of entry.

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