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Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity (review)

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“unsystematically articulated” (255). In this sense, Lewis notes, his findings tend to support Gregory Schopen’s contention that in Indic Mahāyāna Buddhism birth in Sukhāvati was a generalized goal rather than the focus of an organized cult. Jones offers a Geertzian “thick description” of an all-day “buddha-recitation” retreat in contemporary Taiwan. By participating in this demanding ritual the retreatants attempt to attune their minds more completely to Amitābha, thus improving their chances of achieving birth in his realm. Jones contrasts this emphasis on self-cultivation with mainstream Japanese Pure Land’s advocacy of absolute reliance on Amitābha, a position that is rooted in extreme pessimism about practitioners’ ability to contribute even marginally to their own salvation.

The above summaries have only scratched the surface of this collection’s contents, but they should at least provide some sense of the diversity of subjects and methodologies included. What is perhaps most surprising about the book is how cohesive it is in spite of that diversity. The contributors’ shared concern with religious praxis in the Amitābha cult provides an effective unifying principle, and while explicit connections among the various subjects covered are drawn rather sparingly, both in Payne’s introduction and in the essays themselves, the linkages are nonetheless there to be discovered; in reading this volume I was often struck by the fascinating and illuminating ways in which chapters on disparate topics resonated with one another. Without exception the essays are also eminently readable, and the book is carefully edited and handsomely produced. *Approaching the Land of Bliss* is an invaluable contribution to the field of religious studies and will be read with interest and profit by scholars from a broad range of backgrounds.

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Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity. By Anthony D. Smith. Oxford University Press, 2003. 330 pages. \$29.95.

A clue as to the motivation behind Anthony Smith’s *Chosen Peoples* can be found in his preface: “perhaps more detrimental than anything to our understanding of these phenomena,” he writes of the conceptual categories “nationalism” and “religion,” “has been the general trend to dismiss the role of religion and tradition in a globalizing world, and to downplay the persistence of nationalism in a ‘post-national’ global order” (ix). His book provides an effective antidote to this trend and sheds light on the significance of the historical relationship of religion and nationhood for an adequate understanding of today’s world. Its combination of theoretical and historical analysis offers, once again, the erudition, accessibility, and interest which characterizes his whole *corpus* of scholarly studies on nationalism and ethnicity.

The range of the book is huge not only in its geographical, ethnic, and cultural sweep. It brings together political and religious history in the context of the

history of ideas, exploring powerful traditions, sacred texts, paintings and monuments, myths and legends, and drawing on the writings of great literary figures. Maps of the territories discussed, photographs of national commemorative monuments, and paintings representing nationalist motifs and heroic figures provide reference points and illustrations of Smith's thesis. The book's content spans nationalist models and mythologies from Welsh to Siamese, and its chronological scope ranges from biblical times to the twentieth century. Yet the breadth is matched by depth, and the scholarship is never compromised. As usual Smith provides a comprehensive bibliography and notes which offer intriguing subsidiary channels of exploration.

The book begins with an exploration of theoretical concepts and models associated with studies of nationalism or national identity. The author assesses the contribution of eminent writers on these subjects (e.g., Elie Kedourie). Summarizing their positions with critical respect, clarity, and balance, Smith suggests that political, social, and economic theories of nationalism which fail to take account of its belief-systems and their relation to religion miss something of fundamental importance. Despite his emphasis on the importance of the relation between religion and nationalism, he disagrees with Kedourie's view that there is a millennialist component to the latter. "Nationalism," Smith argues, "is a distinctly this-worldly movement and culture." What is important for nationalists "is not some promise of imminent apocalypse, but the very core of traditional religions, their conception of the sacred and their rites of salvation" (15).

The apparent paradox suggested by the combination of this-worldliness with an appropriation of concepts of the sacred may be explained, in part, by Smith's distinction between "functionalist" and "substantive" approaches to religion. On the whole his historical analysis emphasizes the former, though he acknowledges that attention to both is necessary. He represents religion, in its association with nationalism, in Weberian mode, "as a moral, or social, force" rather than in terms of an individual or collective quest for salvation in a "supraempirical cosmos" (25–26). This emphasis on the moral and social, rather than the soteriological, dynamic may also explain why, particularly in the last two chapters of the book, the discussion sometimes moves away from any specific religious connection into wider and more general issues of culture and tradition. The association of ideas of the "glorious dead" with a particular consciousness and experience of national identity, for example, seems to draw on the mythologies of pagan Roman republicanism rather than on the monotheistic belief-systems and traditions (particularly those of Judaism) which are central to the rest of the book.

Smith gives clear, point-by-point definition and analysis of the concepts, models, and approaches which are central to this discussion, particularly in relation to the idea of the nation as a "sacred communion." In addition to identifying specific levels of analysis of the relationship between religion and nationalism, he suggests four "underlying dimensions of the nation" and outlines the "core doctrine" of the nationalist belief-system (31). He explains what is meant by "authenticity" in relation to this system (38–39) and what is implied by a community's covenant with God (50–51). This type of structured analysis,

to which he returns throughout the book, "tightens" the book's argument and keeps it on course.

The concept of a *sacred communion of the people* is, for Smith, "[t]he central concept of the political religion of nationalism" (32). In chapters 3 and 4, he links varieties of nationalism to this sacred communion and community and to the same ancient living root: Biblical ideas of covenant. Exploring how the idea of the sacred is fused with ideas of nature and ethnicity, territory, and historical memory, he also exposes the source of its enduring power in the collective psyche of national politics and cultural identities and its connection with an elevation of the *vox populi*. The concept of "authenticity," which he sees as one of the key concepts linking nationalist and religious belief-systems, is presented as derived substantially from heroes, messiahs, and prophets (40–42).

Analyzing the religious sources of the belief of "elect" nations in their own goodness and separateness, the author presents six linked ideas (those of choice, divine promise, sacred law, collective sanctification, conditional privilege, and witness) as constituents of the myth of "Ethnic Election." He draws an enlightening distinction between the unconditional Abrahamic model of covenant and the causal, "if-then," Mosaic type, conditional upon the obedience of the chosen people and relational, if not contractual in the normal sense. He then applies these developed concepts of covenant and myths of election to specific and very different historical models of nationhood and nationalism: those of the fourth century Armenia, of medieval, feudal Ethiopia and of the Boer *Voortrekkers* of the nineteenth century. The concepts are then used as the tools of a penetrating analysis of Zionism and its later development; for example, Ben-Gurion's emphasis on the necessity of return to the homeland and on national uniqueness suggests that "beneath the secular garb and historicist framework of Zionism, the language and intent of the original Abrahamic Covenant can be clearly discerned" (93).

The chapter on "Missionary Peoples" ranges widely from the idea of divine election among the Franks, and in Bede's England in medieval times, to a historical overview of the relationship between nationalism and Greek and Russian orthodoxy. However, the distinction which is made in chapter 5, between "covenanted" and "missionary" peoples is, Smith acknowledges, "one of degree only" (95). The use of this and other headings to support the book's thematic structure is occasionally called into question by the fact that the examples given would appear to fit as easily fit under one heading as another. It is unclear, for example, why Irish nationalism (which is dealt with only briefly and without reference to its frequent interweaving of religious and nationalistic "language"—as by, e.g., the leader of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Patrick Pearse) should be dealt with under "Sacred Homelands," while Scottish and Welsh are put under "Missionary Peoples," nor why Afrikaner nationalism is the only type to be given detailed attention in *two* different sections (this leads in fact to some repetition; 84 and 143). Again, the fact that there is no obvious chronological order in the topics discussed at times induces a kind of light headedness or cultural and historical motion sickness. In the chapter "Sacred Homelands," the reader must leap from the twentieth century Afrikaner commemorations to Bede's Britain in

the eighth century or from Switzerland to inter-war Egypt. Fortunately, Smith brings us down to earth just often enough by providing firm theoretical and thematic stepping-stones over the shifts in time and space. Indeed, these very unnerving shifts become, through his skill, a means of widening horizons and shaking sterile preconceptions.

Throughout the book, its author draws deeply on concepts which have been at the core of his recent work: those of *ethnie* and *ethnohistory*. In chapter 7 he emphasizes the need to combine “constructivist” and “continuist” models of the connection between the history and the nation in order to understand how “ethnohistories” function to underpin the sense of national identity (167–169). He stresses the importance of distinguishing between professional history and ethnohistory (the former denoting enquiry and the use of documents and artifacts and the latter drawing on myth and memory). It might be argued, of course, that the work of professional historians, too, is shaped, even if at an unconscious level, by ethnohistory. Occasionally, the emphasis on *ethnie* seems to have inhibited discussion of other elements; for example, the significance of religious *difference* as a crucial factor in shaping particular nationalisms. For example, since different religious traditions have produced specific ideas of history and specific approaches to historiography, analysis of how these differences are reflected in different ideas of nationhood and types and manifestations of nationalism might be enlightening. However, such analysis would, no doubt, require a separate volume.

Once again, Anthony Smith has succeeded in thinking “outside the box” of fashionable critical theory while, at the same time, engaging with it on its own terms. He combines balanced erudition and an important contribution to knowledge of the dynamic relation between religion and nationalism with a deep commitment to his subject and a passionate awareness of its implications for the future of social, political, and cultural relationships.

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Common Morality: Deciding What to Do. By Bernard Gert. Oxford University Press, 2004. 179 pages. \$25.00

Common Morality fits into that special, useful genre of philosophical scholarship that lays out the comprehensive conditions for moral reasoning in a manner accessible to students and intelligent laymen. One of the reasons it reads so well is that it is the fourth restatement of Gert’s descriptive account of morality, which he has been developing for the last forty years. (The first three were *The Moral Rules: A New Rational Foundation for Morality*, Harper & Row, 1970; *Morality, A New Justification of the Moral Rules*, Oxford, 1988; and most recently, *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*, Oxford, 1998). Not only is this printing the most succinct of the four, it addresses some important objections that ensued following the earlier renditions.