

Covenant and continuity: ethno-symbolism and the myth of divine election

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ABSTRACT. Throughout history the myth of divine election – a community's collective belief in its nomination by the deity for a special destiny – has provided a supremely potent catalyst for social solidarity and political mobilization. Yet this sublime stimulator of ethnogenesis, comprehensive demarcator of ethnic identity, and durable guarantor of ethno-cultural preservation has been largely neglected by many of the most prominent scholars of nationalism who have often discounted the relevance of the myth of divine election with regard to modern nationalist movements. However, Anthony D. Smith has afforded considerable attention to the concept of chosenness and its significance for the nationalist project. This article will assess Smith's contribution to the subject and will examine how his ethno-symbolic approach has illuminated the ways in which ethnic groups have been infused by the myth of divine election. And, utilizing the ethno-symbolic perspective, this article will explore how this ineffable and persistent sense of providential destiny continues to influence modern communities and hence international politics.

Religion and politics

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have caused many analysts to reconsider the influence of religion on politics. Indeed, in the words of Karen Armstrong, 'In the middle of the twentieth century, it was generally assumed by pundits and commentators that secularism was the coming ideology and that religion would never again become a force in international affairs. But the fundamentalists have reversed this trend and gradually, in both the United States and the Muslim world, religion has become a force that every government has been forced to take seriously' (Armstrong 2001: vii–viii). Yet, although the devastating assault on New York and Washington horrifically drove home this reality, countless and varied events, including the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the BJP in India, the continuing failure to reach a peace settlement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict due to the growing influence of religious revivalist rejectionists on each side, numerous episodes of ethno-confessional violence in Africa and Asia, controversies

concerning the teaching of evolution and creationism in US public schools, and, of course, the preliminary terrorist attacks orchestrated by *al-Qaeda* during the preceding decade, must have surely signaled the political resurgence of religion – if indeed it had actually ever completely retreated from the public sphere. In any event, especially after 9/11, it is impossible to dismiss religion's profound imprint on world politics. Indeed, after contemplating the disorder of the global system following the attacks, Christopher Catherwood, correctly concludes, 'one thing can perhaps be said for certain: religion will be a major player in international affairs. The religious dimension of questions cannot now be safely ignored' (Catherwood 2002: 165).

The myth of divine election

However, it remains to be seen if this renewed analytical awareness of the role of religion in politics will also extend to a concept which has been at the core of many modern nationalists movements – the myth of divine election. Indeed, the concept of *chosenness*, that is of a particular people especially anointed by the Deity to discharge a providentially-ordained mission, to fulfill a holy and cosmologically-determined destiny, or who collectively possess a divine warrant to subdue, and propagate the faith in, a heathen land, has been throughout history a uniquely potent catalyst for social mobilization and national coherence.¹ When the cause of a people is conceived to be the very will of God, the collectivity is infused with a powerful sense of purpose which transcends the more mundane considerations of socio-political organization. There is a charge which defies human contemplation and a calling to which all members of the community must respond. Failure to promote and realize the collective vocation may incur the wrath of the Creator, lead to the dismemberment of the people, and – for its individual members – the prospect of eternal damnation.

The classic example of a chosen people is, of course, the ancient Hebrews whose epic narrative of election, exodus, exile in the wilderness and ultimate redemption has been related to successive generations through the Old Testament.² Although myths of ethnic election are hardly confined within the Judeo-Christian tradition, many Christian communities have seen themselves as successors to biblical Israel as collective recipients of divine favor and therefore as the new Chosen People (O'Brien 1988, chs 1–2). Adrian Hastings argues that the first proto-typical nation, England, originated during the Middle Ages and arose from the biblical model of the ancient Hebrews. Hastings reveals that Bede, an eminent authority on the Bible, recognized parallels between his English nation – with its single language and collective allegiance to God – and the Israelites of the Old Testament (Hastings 1997: ch. 2). Although there are other examples of pre-Reformation collectivities who were self-assured of a distinct and sublime communion with the Almighty, Conor Cruise O'Brien shows that Protestant communities – which interpreted the Scriptures, especially, the Old Testament literally – were particularly susceptible to self-conceptions of chosenness as an

increasingly powerful identification with the ancient Israelites produced an irresistible and infinitely formidable fusion of religion and nationalism (O'Brien 1988: 19–25). Hartmut Lehmann and William R. Hutchinson reveal: 'Nothing inspired this symbiosis of nationalism and Christianity more than the chosen people model as it was derived, accurately or not, from the Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, without such symbols as the "Old Testament" account of a chosen people, a people united under God, the frequently powerful union of nationalism and Christianity might have been less feasible in nations like Great Britain, Germany, or the United States' (Lehmann and Hutchinson 1994: 288). Certainly it seems difficult to adequately comprehend nationalism as an ideology without acknowledging its religious concomitant from which it so often draws its fervor. Indeed, Anthony D. Smith claims that even the first use of the term 'nationalism' – interestingly not until 1836 – in English 'appears to be theological, the doctrine that some nations are divinely elected' (Smith 2001: 5).

Although there have been contemporary studies which have examined the identification with the ancient Hebrews of various communities and the ways in which this self-conception as a latter day Israel shaped their socio-political development,³ considering the profound influence of the myth of divine election on so many modern nationalists projects, the subject has hardly attracted pervasive scholarly attention. Clifford Longley explains, 'At first glance (at least to my modern eye) the concept sounds utterly outdated, or something confined to fundamentalist extremists. That is doubtless one reason why researchers have left it alone' (Longley 2002: x). Moreover, much of the contemporary research has been of a decidedly deconstructionist approach which attempts to analytically dissect and ultimately dismiss the historical myth of divine election – as it relates to a particular people – as slightly more than a quasi-religious subterfuge, fabricated and manipulated by a nationalist elite, and imposed on the masses as a vehicle for political mobilization. In this regard, the concept of chosenness is often interpreted as merely a sanctimoniously-contrived ideology – retroactively interjected into history – to justify a dubious record of ethnocentrism, racism, colonialism, warfare, enslavement or worse.⁴

And, to be sure there has been a rather conspicuous lack of analysis of the myth of divine election from a comparative perspective.⁵ Furthermore, with the exception of Smith, the subject has been largely neglected by many of the most prominent theorists of nationalism. Smith points out that myths of ethnic election are often overlooked by other scholars of nationalism who subscribe to the 'modernist' paradigm with its emphasis on more recent variables in the creation of nations such as the state, economic determinants, and the intelligentsia (Smith 1992: 440; 1993: 9; 1998).

Smith's ethno-symbolic approach

Smith's interest in the myth of divine election is multi-faceted and his extensive research in this regard has shed very valuable light on the concept.⁶ Smith's

ethno-symbolic approach which contemplates the subjective scope of the myths, symbols, and memories which in themselves constitute ethno-national identity has proven a most instructive perspective from which to analyze the communal conviction of chosenness.⁷ Smith assesses the ways in which myths of ethnic election serve as a mechanism for socio-cultural survival and a stimulus for ethno-political mobilization. He also indicates how the concept of the chosen people intensifies the identification of the community with its homeland. Moreover, Smith seeks to demonstrate the extent to which the properties of modern secular nationalism are analogous to the characteristics of antecedent myths of ethnic election and how the persistent power of this underlying idea of chosenness continues to influence communities even today.

Two Types of Election

Walbert Bühlmann argues, ‘Most peoples, on all continents, nourish and foster a marked ethnocentrism, generally accentuated and supported by religion They see themselves as an altogether special people – as the people of God, and hence explicitly or implicitly, a chosen people’ (Bühlmann 1982: 187). However Smith cautions:

A myth of divine election should not be equated with mere ethnocentrism. Ethnic communities have quite commonly regarded themselves as the moral centre of the universe and as far as possible affected to ignore or despise those around them. A myth of ethnic election is more demanding. To be chosen is to be placed under moral obligations. One is chosen on condition that one observes certain moral, ritual, and legal codes, and only for as long as one continues to do so. The privilege of election is accorded only to those who are sanctified, whose life-style is an expression of sacred values. The benefits of election are reserved for those who fulfill the required observances. (Smith 1992: 441)

Yet, Smith does distinguish between two different types of ethnic election which he describes as ‘missionary’ and ‘covenantal’. Smith relates, ‘missionary election myths exalt their ethnies by assigning them god-given tasks or missions of warfare or conversion or overlordship...’ (Smith: 1999b: 15) In the ‘missionary’ myth the community believes itself to be divinely anointed to preserve and promote the true faith and to champion the ecclesiastical establishment which sustains it. Moreover the community feels itself compelled to assiduously deliver new congregants to the religion through a vigorous campaign of proselytism which may often entail conquest. Smith argues that this is the most common variety of chosenness and that myths of this sort of ethnic election infused Armenians, the Franks, the Orthodox Byzantines and Russians, Catalans, medieval Magyars who resisted the Ottoman expansion, and Catholic Poles. And, according to Smith, non-Christian peoples such as the Arabs during and after the time of the Prophet and Shi’ite Persians during the Safavid period were also inspired by the myth of missionary election (Smith 2000a: 67; 2000b: 804).

However, the covenantal form of divine election is far more demanding. Like that of biblical Israel which provides the model for this kind of chosenness, the election of the people which subscribes to this contractual myth is conditional upon the strict compliance with divine, moral commandments, the scrupulous adherence to the holy ordinances, the faithful commemoration of sacred rituals, and the conscientious discharge of the consecrated and collective vocation – to dutifully fulfill that which is seen to be the will of God. Smith notes that the covenantal myth has been less evident historically and primarily attached to certain Protestant communities which have seen themselves as the theological heirs and trans-historical successors of the ancient Israelites such as the Puritan settlers of New England, the Ulster Scots, and Afrikaners (Smith 2000a: 67; 2000b: 804–5).

Smith observes:

To see oneself as potentially ‘an holy nation’ is to link chosenness indissolubly with collective sanctification. Salvation is accessible only through redemption which in turn requires a return to former ways and beliefs, which are the means of sanctification. Hence the recurrent note of ‘return’ in many ethno-religious traditions which inspire movements of both religious reform and cultural restoration. Given the ineluctable subjectivity of ethnic identification, this moral summons to re-sanctify the potential elect provides a powerful mechanism for ethnic self-renewal and long-term ethnic survival (Smith 1991: 37).

Indeed, Smith emphasizes that the myth of divine election sustains the continuity of cultural identity, and, in that regard, has enabled certain pre-modern communities such as the Jews, Armenians, and Greeks to survive and persist over centuries and millennia (Smith 1993: 15–20). Moreover, myths of divine election have empowered a number of *ethnies* even to prevail against patently catastrophic corporate reversals as the loss of political independence and exile from the ancestral homeland (Smith 1992: 440).

‘Patterns of Ethnic Survival’

Chosenness is the supreme guarantor of ethnic durability and Smith links myths of divine election to four different ‘patterns of ethnic survival’ which he describes as *imperial-dynastic*, *communal-demotic*, *emigrant colonist*, and *diaspora-restoration* (Smith 1992: 446–8).

As Smith points out, in the *imperial-dynastic* pattern, it is the monarch or royal family which espouses the myth of election. Yet, the conception of chosenness is eventually transmitted to their subjects as well through the people’s identification with the regnal emblems and customs. Ultimately the election myth is sustained by this formidable ‘conjunction of dynasty, land and people’. And, with the recession of royal supremacy, the myth of election is evenly more intimately invested in the people who now become the principal locus of corporate sanctification (Smith 1992: 446–7). Yet it is the people itself which provides the repository for the election myth in the *communal-demotic* pattern – particularly an *ethnie* which attempts to maintain its traditional

culture in the midst of alien invasion and occupation in a homeland which is thought to retain a sacred character (Smith 1992: 447). As is suggested by the name of the third pattern, the *emigrant-colonist*, the myth of divine election is invested in an immigrant community which seeks to establish a new moral order in the wilderness, or at least in an unfamiliar territory, to which they believe they have been delivered by the deity (Smith 1992: 447–8). And, finally, it is the reclamation – or the emotive corporate longing to do so – of an abandoned homeland from which the community originated in the distant past which vehiculates the myth in the final model of ethnic survival which Smith calls the *diaspora-restoration* pattern. He explains, ‘The return of the community to its ancestral home from which it had been exiled became the precondition of collective redemption’ (Smith 1992: 448). And, historically, such myths have provided an irresistible stimulus for territorial aggrandizement, mass insurrection, collective translocation, and struggles for the communal recovery of the lost homeland (Smith: 1992: 448).

The Sacred Homeland

The idea of the homeland is central to the four configurations of ethnic persistence which Smith describes. And, indeed, Smith has consistently maintained that a collective identification with a particular territory is an essential foundation of ethnic identity (See Smith 1986: 28–29; 1995: 56). Yet the homeland is far more than simply the site of physical habitation, it is invested with a psychological dimension of symbiotic belonging. Smith clarifies, ‘we find many groups of people endowing with a particular collective emotion a specific terrain which they occupy, whether it be a local district, a region or a wider ethnic territory. What is at stake is the idea of an historic and poetic landscape, one imbued with the culture and history of a group, and vice versa, a group part of whose character is felt by themselves and outsiders to derive from the particular landscape they inhabit, and commemorated as such in song and verse’ (Smith 1997: 11).

Smith employs the term, *ethnoscape*, to describe the mystical affinity of the people for *its* homeland; and, as might be expected, the dynamic is especially coherent in a community which is infused by a collective self-concept of divine election. Indeed, Smith observes, ‘Myths of ethnic chosenness not only underpin peoples and cultures; they also provide charters and title deeds of sacred homelands (Smith 1992: 450) And, indeed, what impetus could more profoundly unite the consecrated community with its homeland than the belief that it was ceded to them by the deity as a sacred parcel signifying the people’s election? For a “holy people” adhering to a single sacred life-style, repeated performance of sacred acts in fulfillment of the mission with which the community is entrusted sanctifies the land and turns it into a reward for faithful observance of a “covenant”’ (Smith 1997: 14). Yet, the homeland is also consecrated as it encompasses the terrain on which heroic ethnic forebears led the community in the collective realization of its providential destiny and

contains the soil in which they now rest. Smith relates, 'These legendary or historical figures are venerated by the people for the benefits, material and spiritual, that they bestow on the community, and for the divine blessings they bring on the people. So the places where holy men and heroes walked and taught, fought and judged, prayed and died, are felt to be holy themselves; their tombs and monuments become places of veneration and pilgrimage, testifying to the glorious and sacred past of the ethnic community' (Smith 1997: 14)

And, even if modernity and rationalism should ultimately dilute the collective religious conviction of the elect community, the homeland will likely retain its sacred character. Smith explains:

Indeed, as secularization becomes more common, ancestral homelands acquire greater sanctity. This is partly the result of displacement of effect: the transfer of awe and reverence from the deity and his or her 'church' to the location of the shrine and its worshippers, for here all of the members participate equally by virtue of being ancestrally related to the territory in question. In this case, to *have been* hallowed suffices; once blessed, the land becomes even more sacred, because it attracts to itself much of the exaltation and holy love that was formerly accorded the deity. Thus 'religion', or in this case religious sentiments, permeates the secular forms and hence penetrates the realm of worldly politics (Smith 2000b: 807).

Yet, Smith is skeptical about the extent to which the present-day forces of rationalism and materialism have succeeded in consigning the myths of ethnic election to the pre-modern past, and he observes that traditional religion remains a pervasive influence in the modern world (Smith 1992: 449). Moreover, according to Smith, the secular ideology of modern nationalism itself appropriates the sacred character of religious antecedents. Indeed, Smith asserts, 'Nationalism is the secular, modern equivalent of the pre-modern, sacred myth of ethnic election' (Smith 1991: 84).

Ethnic election and modern nationalism

Smith explains 'that nationalism, as an ideological movement that seeks autonomy, unity and identity for a population deemed to be a nation, draws much of its passion, conviction and intensity from the belief in a national mission and destiny; and this belief in turn owes much to a powerful religious myth of ethnic election. Modern nationalism can be seen in part as deriving from powerful, external and pre-modern traditions, symbols and myths which are then taken up and recast in the nationalist ideologies of national mission and destiny as these emerge in the crucible of modernization' (Smith 1999a: 332). Yet, this does not necessarily mean that the myth of divine election has been entirely supplanted by modern nationalism. It is a durable collective mind-set and Smith reminds, 'The profound consequences of the concept of a chosen people, the passionate attachment to sacred lands and centers ... proved to be an enduring legacy for many peoples from late antiquity to modern times, sustaining their sense of uniqueness and nurturing their hopes of regeneration' (Smith 1991: 50). And, consequently, Smith clarifies that even

today, ‘We sometimes find examples of a symbiosis and even a fusion between the earlier religious myths and the nationalist ideal. Here the old religious myths, particularly where they are associated with the idea of a ‘covenant’ between a people and its god, have survived intact, and are more or less consciously fused with a modern ethno-political nationalism’ (Smith 1999a: 332).

Smith maintains that there is an affinity and indeed an ‘ideological kinship between religious myths of ethnic election and nationalist ideals of mission and destiny’ (Smith 1999a: 335). Just as a myth of ethnic election infused the elect people with a sense of moral ascendancy over outsiders, the ideology of nationalism also morally elevates the members of the nation above those who are not a part of the ethno-national community. Nationalism also entails the promise of the eventual triumph of the nation in a similar manner to which the myth of chosenness assured an ultimate providential rescue from degradation and oppression. The myth of divine election erected a formidable barrier between the sanctified community and others whom the deity did not favor. Nationalism too establishes socio-cultural criteria which distinguishes members from non-members in the demarcation of an exclusive ethno-national boundary. And, as all members of the elect ethnic were expected to faithfully discharge the duties required to maintain their collective election, nationalism also commands of its adherents a common responsibility of popular participation in the various national tasks which ensure the survival and success of the nation (Smith 1999a: 334–9).

Smith also advises that in some cases there is a covariance between an intense nationalist project and the ethnic myth of election which preceded it. He states, ‘in both Holland and England in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a strong affirmation of both religious and national chosenness. In these cases, the two were inseparable: their nationalist ideals and sense of mission were a consequence of their belief in the divine election of their ethnies, and that belief was reinforced by their territorial national ideals’ (Smith 1999a: 340).

The Example of the USA

According to Smith, this same covariance between ethnic chosenness and intense nationalism is also evident in the example of the USA ‘despite the fact that religious fervor had declined, even in New England, by the end of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that early Puritan beliefs in divine Providence and ethno-religious election helped to shape the central national myths of mission and destiny in the War of Independence and the foundation of the Republic’ (Smith 1999a: 340). And, as Smith also points out, it was this same collective conception of religious and national chosenness which incubated the transcendent and irresistible article of America’s sanctified national mission – manifest destiny.

Much has been written on the self-conception of the USA as a latter-day Israel and how the myth of chosenness defined the character of an American

ethos, mandated the establishment of a just and upright nation, infused the citizens of a fledgling republic with an overarching sense of purpose, and prescribed the promotion of republican institutions through territorial expansion (Hudson 1970: ch. 1; Johnson 1986: 6; Tuveson 1968; Grosby 2002: ch. 9). Furthermore, the myth of divine election encouraged Americans to interpret their history through a religious prism and, in this regard, provided a stimulus for socio-political mobilization (Cherry 1997: 19). Ernest Lee Tuveson argues, 'confidence in the ideal of America as the new chosen people reached a peak of enthusiasm in the years immediately preceding 1860' (Tuveson 1968: 187). Certainly both antagonists in the Civil War were utterly convinced that the conflict was the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that the Almighty was certainly on their side (see Beringer *et al.* 1986: ch. 5). And, although James Moorhead advises that there were often contradictory visions of American destiny, he demonstrates that the myth of election continued to influence the public debate surrounding such events as the acquisition of colonial possessions in 1898, the entry of the USA into the First World War, and the passage of the anti-immigration National Origins Act of 1924 (Moorhead 1994). Yet, Winthrop S. Hudson suggests that the 'theological language, religious metaphors, and biblical allusions' which so powerfully informed the political dialogue of the USA declined after the First World War with the collective national confidence 'in a living God (judging, correcting, disciplining, guiding, and directing the American people) being slowly eroded and reduced to the pale affirmations of twentieth century "civil religion"' (Hudson 1970: xi). And, to be sure, only a very few studies have examined how the American myth of divine election has functioned in the more contemporary period.

However Smith argues that the older myth of religious chosenness continues to inspire contemporary America's sense of national mission and has exerted an enduring influence on US foreign policy even throughout the 1980s (Smith 1999a: 348). Indeed, in his impressive study of US global interventionism during the early days of the Cold War, John Fousek persuasively argues that the 'traditional nationalist ideologies of American chosenness, mission, and destiny' created a powerful anticommunist consensus which electrified Washington's determination to confront Soviet expansionism (Fousek 2000: 7). Conrad Cherry notes that the influence of the Protestant religious revival in the USA during the 1950s could be felt in even the highest offices of the land and patriotic Americans believed it to be their religious duty to defend democracy from the scourge of atheistic communism (Cherry 1998: 303–5). This concept of a providential mission to combat communism was very clearly articulated in Barry Goldwater's historic and controversial speech in 1964 in which he accepted the nomination of the Republican Party for President. Disillusioned by what he saw as the failure of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to beat back the communist advance in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, the redoubtable Senator from Arizona declared: 'The good Lord raised this mighty Republic to be a home for the brave to flourish as the land of

the free – not to stagnate in the swampland of collectivism, not to cringe before the bully of communism’.

William W. Cobb points out that the Puritan myth of Americans as a chosen people indeed figured prominently in the formulation of US policy toward Vietnam. However, Cobb recognizes an inherent tension in terms of the historical interpretation of the foundation myth among those who believe that America’s elect status and national mission compels the active promotion of its lofty ideals of democracy and freedom abroad and those who feel that the providential destiny of the USA should only provide the model which other nations should seek to follow. Cobb demonstrates that the first interpretation often influenced policymakers to escalate American involvement in the conflict while the latter version of the myth sometimes reinforced the apprehension of critics of the war. In any event, despite the traumatic failure of the USA to accomplish its ‘mission’ in Vietnam, Cobb concludes that the myth of a providential destiny so deeply ingrained in the national consciousness survived the defeat in Southeast Asia and would subsequently continue to provide a justification for American interventionism abroad (Cobb 1998). Cherry, however, is not nearly so certain and argues that following the US reversal in Vietnam, ‘the rhetoric of an aggressively pursued national destiny abroad seemed to connect less and less with the American experience. The failure of that long and costly war to deliver on several presidential administrations’ promises to preserve democratic interests in the world rendered the rhetoric suspect’ (Cherry 1998:307).

Yet, the ‘rhetoric’ would return in a most robust, unalloyed, and unapologetic manner when Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981 and it seemed to strike a responsive chord among an American people which had again been aroused by the spirit of religious revivalism.⁸ At his inauguration Reagan read aloud from II Chronicles 7:14: ‘If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land’ (cited in Schweizer 2002: 129). As if the messenger of the Almighty, Reagan indeed reminded his countrymen that they were an elect nation and that the covenant sealed by their Puritan forebears was still in force and that Americans must fulfill their providential destiny. Professing a vision of national renewal and collective redemption, Reagan promoted a project which was both political and religious to recover the golden age of American stability and prosperity and to reclaim the national greatness of the USA which was the holy birthright of the American people. And, amplifying Goldwater’s cosmic summons, Reagan preached that a vigilant prosecution of the campaign against the godless communist menace was inextricably linked to America’s providential mission (Edel 1987: ch. 9; Erickson 1985: ch. 5; Combs 1993, ch. 4). According to a recent biographer, following the assassination attempt in 1981, the un-reconstructed Cold Warrior became firmly convinced that God had rescued him so that he as president could combat the fiendish nemesis which he would ultimately denounce as the ‘evil empire’ (Schweizer 2002: 133–7). As Wilbur Edel

reiterates, 'more than any other aspect of the Reagan program, the battle against Soviet communism took on the character of a crusade of good against evil' (Edel 1987: 149). And, of course, Reagan's vice-president and successor, George Bush was quick to invoke a divine blessing when he triumphantly heralded the end of the Cold War and he also employed the language of religious election to justify the intervention in Somalia and Desert Storm (Cobb 1998: 197–8, Cherry 1998: 307, Lehman and Hutchinson 1994: 285–6). And, his son, the current President George W. Bush reminded Americans that theirs remained a special destiny when, in his inaugural address, he proclaimed 'an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs' the progress of the nation (Longley 2002: 9–10).⁹

But, does the idea of a providential destiny continue to resonate in the American people in a world made more complicated and less secure by the events of 9/11? Conrad Cherry remains skeptical. Writing in the late 1990s, he emphasizes the lack of stability in the post-Cold War era and concludes, 'The new disordered situation would mute considerably any bold, self-confident claims about American destiny under God in the world at large' (Cherry 1998: 308). However, Longley argues that the attacks on New York and Washington have actually reinforced both an American sense of destiny and chosenness (Longley 2002: 69). There is much to substantiate Longley's assertion and, in a way, his claim should come as no surprise. Indeed, O'Brien reminds us that notions of chosenness – although they may remain dormant for years – usually reappear during times of crisis (O'Brien 1994: 144). It should be remembered that shortly after the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell warned their countrymen that God was chastising an increasingly apostate American nation for permitting abortion and homosexuality. Although most Americans would hardly subscribe to this view of extreme covenantal logic – and, indeed both conservative churchmen ultimately retracted their callous and insensitive commentary, it does seem that Longley's observation is correct. Americans have certainly seemed to rediscover a sense of national mission to preserve their 'city on the hill' against the insidious threats which seek to undermine American democracy and prosperity. And, did not President Bush – at least initially and, in this case, most unwisely – employ the term 'crusade' to describe the War on Terror which his administration announced that it would vigorously prosecute against the enemies of freedom? And, even though the Bush White House has scrupulously reiterated its stance that the military campaign is in no way directed against Muslims *per se*, a number of prominent evangelical Protestant leaders – some of whom with close political connections – have made extremely offensive and provocative denunciations of Islam and its founder which inevitably suggests that the American people are engaged in a holy war against the infidel. Yet, in any event, the official rhetoric which has trumpeted the strike on Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq is hardly devoid of religious fervor and emphasizes the righteous cause of a civilized, moral, and democratic society against the forces of evil and darkness.

It is also interesting to note that a number of polls conducted after 9/11 indicated that many Americans were re-embracing organized religion. Certainly evangelical Protestantism seems to be flourishing as evidenced by the commercial success of contemporary Christian music, the rapid growth of religious movements such as Young Life, and the vigorous expansion of foreign missions – especially it seems into Muslim lands. Writing after the upheaval of the World War I, Edward Frank Humphrey observed that Americans were reevaluating ‘the elements of our nationalism; we are asking ourselves, ‘What is Americanism?’’ (Humphrey 1924: 8). Humphrey seemed to suggest that religion, which had been such an integral determinant of US history might well exert a remedial and restorative influence. And, today, it seems that religion is equally readily available to fill the void. As the recent controversy surrounding the removal of a monument to the Ten Commandments from an Alabama courthouse illustrates, religion in the USA has never completely retreated from the public square and – particularly in these uncertain times – it surely seems to resonate in the national consciousness and to remind Americans of a sense of providential destiny. Smith is indeed quite correct to emphasize the continuity of the myth of national election in the American experience.

Clash of the Elect?

And there is yet another intellectually intriguing observation in Smith’s research which may also shed light on another aspect of international politics in the post 9/11 period. Smith notes that a politically powerful ‘sense of national mission and destiny’ is not only characteristic of the USA but also of contemporary France. Smith reveals, ‘The Gaullist belief in France’s national civilizing mission and her separate cultural destiny has had profound consequences for both the creation of European unity *vis-à-vis* the Anglo-Saxons and for France’s leadership of her former colonies in Africa’ (Smith: 1999a: 348). Could it be that the current atmosphere of estrangement in Franco-American relations represents far more than merely a disagreement over intervention in Iraq and the attendant issues relating to oil and reconstruction contracts? Might it be that the dispute between Washington and Paris is symptomatic of an increasing collision of the competing national missions of two nations which are powerfully infused with a sense of providential mission? It is a question which certainly warrants further attention. And, surely no one could provide a more compelling analysis in this regard than Anthony D. Smith.

Notes

1 This passage is taken from Cauthen (1999: 17).

2 There are a number of studies of the concept of election as it applied to biblical Israel from historical, theological, and philosophical perspectives. See Booth (1959); Pythian-Adams (1934);

Rowley (1950); Danell (1953); Jocz (1958); Heller [n.d.]; Sohn (1991); Wells (2000); Novak (1995); and Eisen (1995).

3 For studies of the English and British, see Hastings (1997); Greenfeld (1992), ch. 2; McLeod (1999). For the Welsh, see Llywelyn (1999) and Davies (2002). For the Afrikaners, see Templin (1984) and Cauthen (1997). And, for antebellum Southerners and Confederates, see Peterson (1978) and Faust (1988).

4 This passage is taken from Cauthen (1999: 18). This deconstructionist attitude is clearly reflected in du Toit (1983, 1984, 1985, 1994) who argues that the Afrikaner myth of election was a fabrication of a nationalist elite which ultimately reinterpreted Afrikaner history through this sublime prism. Akenson (1992: 56–59) offers a critical appraisal of du Toit's approach. However, Zangwill (1918: 52–53), also argues 'that the British imperial project had already reached the stage of maturity before intellectuals attempted to invest it with religious significance'. And, Marstin (1979: 75–78) relates that even though Americans genuinely subscribed to the idea of a divine covenant during the days of the early republic, the election myth eventually degenerated into a cynical justification for imperial expansion.

5 Akenson (1992), Hutchinson and Lehman (1994), Cauthen (1999), Jospe, Madsen, and Ward (2001) and Longley (2002) do however provide comparative studies. See also Elazar (1996).

6 It is indeed unfortunate that the submission deadline for this article precedes the publication date of, and thus prevents comment on, Smith's most recent work on ethnic election which is entitled *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* and is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in November 2003.

7 For a detailed discussion of ethno-symbolism, see Smith (1998: ch. 8).

8 Although Cherry (1998: 307) acknowledges that Reagan appropriated religious themes, he provides only minimal commentary in this regard. See Combs (1993: 105) and Johnson (1986: 12–13) for discussions of Reagan's emergence on the heels of the religious revival.

9 Longley (2002) offers an extremely interesting appraisal of how the myth of divine election has functioned in the USA and persuasively argues that a sense of chosenness continues to infuse American identity.

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