

Justifying the Indefensible? “Chosenness”, Difference and Political Conflict

Frances Widdowson (Mount Royal University) and
Albert Howard (Independent Researcher)

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In studies of nationalism, it has been noted that one deep source of collective identity, even predating the emergence of modern nation-states, is the idea of “chosenness” - that an ethnic group has been elected by God for a covenant or mission. This notion has played a role in the nationalist aspirations in many countries, including the United States, South Africa, and especially, Israel. It also forms the basis of many aboriginal claims to national self-determination within the Canadian state.

But what impact do assumptions of chosenness have on political conflict and the capacity for ethnic groups to reconcile their differences with one another? Can conceptions of chosenness co-exist alongside attempts to achieve equality between all peoples, enabling human dignity to be respected and peace and social justice to become a reality?

By comparing and contrasting conceptions of chosenness, an attempt will be made to investigate these questions. The paper will examine whether accepting chosenness constitutes a legitimate recognition of difference, or is an attempt to use religious mythology to mystify political goals that cannot be justified by rational argument.

What is “Chosenness”?

Chosenness is the condition of having been selected by a superhuman being, having supernatural power over nature, for some special circumstance. As Anthony Smith explains,

to be chosen in this sense is to be singled out for special purposes by, and hence to stand in a unique relation to, the divine. Persons or groups who are chosen are marked off from the multitude, often at first by a divine promise, to enable them to obey and perform God’s will. They are required to stand apart, to follow a designated path, which is part of that promise, and they therefore play a unique role in the moral economy of global salvation, one that is determined for them by the deity, but to which they adhere voluntarily. By doing so, they become God’s elect, saved and privileged through their obedience to His will and their identification with His plan.¹

Smith points out that this does not necessarily mean group exclusiveness or superiority, although it “might breed both”. He notes that “human groups have sought to justify a sense of exclusive

¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 48-49.

superiority on many grounds – biological, aesthetic, social, or political. But none of these requires the idea of being chosen, and hence of standing apart from profane things and people. It is these sacred elements that are at the heart of the idea of a chosen people”.²

Chosenness can range from the privilege of winning a lottery, or benefitting from some other stroke of material good fortune, to having the special responsibilities of a morally superior human being. In the first incident, the supplicant simply asks for suspension of natural laws to fulfill the wished-for result. The first individuals are usually people who pray requesting compassionate consideration through the supernatural, without suggesting that their actions or thoughts deserve it – except possibly as reward for their exceptional devotion. There may be specific promises or declared intent of future virtuousness but no evidence, or surety, the promise will be fulfilled can be presented at this point – the supernatural benefactor is expected to trust the petitioner.³ Other attempts to solicit supernatural favour veer from such poetic tragedy to the crass vulgarity of athletes and coaches praying in aid of acquiring special interference - and an unfair advantage over their opponents.⁴ How this selfish and malicious request may be fulfilled by a just God is beyond reason, unless the petitioner is truly chosen.

With the second group, no request to a Supreme Being is made. The belief stipulates that God has already chosen the object for the obligation that implies a correspondingly higher moral order. Usually, it is an exclusive group that is the object of the chooser; members are not addressed as individuals, but are parts of identifiable cliques, determined either by an inalterable biological feature – heredity/genetics - or a social concept. This is what Anthony Smith refers to as the “covenantal” type of election. As Smith points out, “the people enter into a *covenant* with the deity, who promises them a special and exalted role among the peoples of the world, provided they follow his precepts. If they do so, they stand apart from the rest of humanity, and they regard themselves as active ‘witnesses’ and agents of God’s plan for the world; and they seek to regulate the conduct of their people accordingly”.⁵

Smith notes that there are six, linked, ideas associated with the idea of the divine covenant: choice, promise, sacred law, collective sanctification, conditional privilege, and witness.⁶ It is these characteristics, in Smith’s view, that lead “covenanted peoples” to “turn inwards, away from the profane world in their dedication to, and witness of, the true faith and sacred duty of obedience to God’s commands”,⁷ and to embrace “separation and exclusion”.⁸ The logic of covenantal thinking – that if the rules set out for the chosen by God are followed, privileges will be given – can easily be reversed. As Donald Akenson points out with respect to his analysis of

² Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 48.

³ An exemplary example of this moral bargaining is shown in Graham Green’s, *The End of the Affair*, when a woman promises to give up what she most cherishes – her lover – if God will save his life.

⁴ The tennis star, Andre Agassi, in his recent book, *Open*, castigated Michael Chang for this behaviour: “He [Chang] thanks God – credits God – for the win, which offends me. That God should take sides in a tennis match, that God should side against me, that God should be in Chang’s box, feels ludicrous and insulting. I beat Chang and savor every blasphemous stroke.”

⁵ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 49.

⁶ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, pp. 50-51.

⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 95.

⁸ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, pp. 95-6.

the Afrikaners, Ulster-Scots and Jewish-Israelis, “it is a small and natural step in covenantal thinking to affirm that the possession of might (whether in the form of economic prosperity or military power) is evidence that one is morally right”.⁹ Therefore, although the most obvious example of the covenantal type of chosenness is the case of Israel, this form was developed and adapted by a number of other peoples, including medieval Armenians and Ethiopians.¹⁰

In the missionary form of chosenness, on the other hand, “the people and their leaders are entrusted with the task or *mission* on behalf of the deity, and of his earthly representatives. They therefore see themselves as the ‘instruments’ of God’s plan, executing His will on earth and hastening the day of salvation” [emphasis in the original].¹¹ Smith points out that

missionary peoples are...dedicated to what they see as the true faith and the word of God, but they seek to expand into and transform the world, by example, persuasion, or force, or a combination of these. Typically, we find their leaders and their dominant elites and institutions bent on entering and converting the profane or heathen world – through missionary activities, or conquest. Through such transforming acts, the true nature of the communities they lead are revealed, for the sacred task entrusted to them by the deity is both in and of this world, their goal being nothing less than the submission of the profane world to the deity and its sanctification through the salvation of souls”.¹²

Unlike covenantal peoples, therefore, “expansion and inclusion” are the main characteristics.¹³ These characteristics are most obvious in the case of the United States and England. With respect to England, authors like John Milton linked English nationalism to internationalism by asserting that his country was at the “head of the column of nations marching towards religious and civil liberty”.¹⁴ Oliver Cromwell even maintained that the English “have had a stamp upon them from God”, and therefore they had a duty to bring this true religion to all other nations.¹⁵ More recently, the United States national anthem refers to “the land of the free and the home of the brave”, claiming this jingoism as justification for a “heav’n rescued land”. “God Bless America” is outright in its imperative title and lyrics. This prayer/song, by Irving Berlin, unabashedly asks for God’s privileged treatment on behalf of the national concept of America. This missionary character began with the Puritans’ idea of the “city on the hill”. As Smith points out, the Puritans’ “sense of providential guidance, though originally confined to the inner life and social organization of small settlements and towns, came from the early nineteenth century to embrace the vast expanses of the continent”. With the agricultural settlement and the displacement and

⁹ Donald Akenson, *God’s People: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 16.

¹⁰ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 7. It is often difficult to determine how the Armenian case constitutes a “people of the covenant”. One exception is when Father Mikayel Chamchian “claimed that the Garden of Eden was located in Armenia, that both God and Adam spoke Armenian, and that consequently, as the speakers of humanity’s original language, the Armenians, not the Jews, constituted the chosen people...”. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 73.

¹¹ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 49.

¹² Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 95.

¹³ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 96.

¹⁴ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 121.

extermination of the indigenous inhabitants, “the belief in a providential and manifest destiny was extended from the chosen people to the land and landscapes of America”.¹⁶

In short, in the first case of chosenness one chooses or applies to join; in the latter individuals are included whether they like it or not. Examples of the first group include Christians, Baha’is, Muslims, Voodoo worshippers, Buddhists, and too many others to list here. The defining feature of these groups is - excepting cultural and social pressures - the assumption that their membership is based on the conviction of the ideology – often believing that the founder was contacted directly by God. In the objective sense members can join or leave according to their beliefs. The second group, determined outside the realm of individual choice, involves ancestral communities that are not dependent upon sincere conviction or faith in the spiritual. Since they are primarily determined by their bloodlines, they hold ethnicity as their religious identity because membership does not depend on any action or conviction of faith – they are pre-chosen because of *who* they are, not *what* they believe. Their unalterable determining feature is blood.

The most significant ancestral community in history, which claims to have been objectively chosen, is the Jewish people - a community of descent that is also a faith community.¹⁷ Seers who proclaim that land was given to the Jews, and that Jews were, and are descendants of, ten tribes of the Bible, do so with an assertion that precludes questioning. In the words of David Novak, “Israel’s only choice seems to be to confirm what God has already done to her and for her. To choose to reject what God has done to her and for her is an unacceptable choice that cannot be allowed to persist. For Israel, there are no multiple options, as we understand that term today”.¹⁸

Thus there is the contradictory presumption of the secular Jew. Jews, almost without exception, accept that descent (through the maternal line), from mythical biblical tribes, has significance in modern life. While the definition is clearly through bloodline – and therefore racial – the designation is the religious belief of being chosen, by God, for a higher and exclusive morality. As Aviel Roshwald points out, in biblical passages “chosenness [of the Jews] is depicted as a moral burden”. He notes that while “all nations are considered bound by the universal Covenant made between God and Noah after the Flood”, the Jewish people “are additionally bound by the far more exacting standards of the Law revealed at Sinai and are to be held to a higher ethical standard than other peoples”.¹⁹ This is because, as Smith argues, “such an elevated role entails a more stringent divine scrutiny and judgement. In a religion that emphasized deeds, intimacy with God was bound to be set more closely” and there would be stronger attempts to guard “against any backsliding and denial of the covenant”. Smith goes on to point out that this is why “Israelites...are...to stand apart ethically and ritually from all other peoples; and this applies not just to the priests, but to the whole congregation of Israel...”.²⁰

¹⁵ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 122.

¹⁶ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 138.

¹⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 23.

¹⁸ David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 163.

¹⁹ Aviel Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 169.

²⁰ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 59.

While the Jewish people are the most obvious case of being objectively chosen, aboriginal people in Canada and elsewhere also can be characterized thusly. The latter, however, have a far less complex form of rationalization. Aboriginal people have been told that “the Creator” has placed them in areas to care for the land – often since “time immemorial”. There is obviously no supporting biblical tradition for this myth, as aboriginal groups had not developed writing before contact. The belief, in fact, seems to have become prominent in the 1970s, as an ideological justification for land claims and self-government agreements. The first public document to espouse this view in Canada was the “Declaration of First Nations”, passed by the National Indian Brotherhood (later to become the Assembly of First Nations) in 1980. This Declaration maintained that

We the Original Peoples of this land know the Creator put us here.

The Creator gave us laws that govern all our relationships to live in harmony with nature and mankind.

The Laws of the Creator defined our rights and responsibilities.

The Creator gave us our spiritual beliefs, our languages, our culture, and a place on Mother Earth which provided us with all our needs.

We have maintained our Freedom, our Languages, and our Traditions from time immemorial.

We continue to exercise the rights and fulfill the responsibilities and obligations given to us by the Creator for the land upon which we were placed.

The Creator has given us the right to govern ourselves and the right to self-determination.

The rights and responsibilities given to us by the creator [sic] cannot be altered or taken away by any other Nation.²¹

It is important to examine the nature of these conceptions of chosenness, even if one does not accept them as an accurate depiction of history. This is because, as Anthony Smith points out, a group’s belief that it is ancestrally chosen means that “it has shared memories and may have a sense of a special purpose and role in history”. This subjective understanding of its mission, in turn, will mean that it is “likely to continue to uphold its myth of common ancestry and common memories vis-à-vis outsiders”. In Smith’s view, “the special nature of the covenanted ethnic community” means that the “ethical impulse that flows from it” results in a “politics of collective responsibility [that has] been particularly conducive to the survival and renewal of the community over *la longue durée*”.²²

The cases of Jewish and aboriginal chosenness also provide an interesting contrast with which to examine this phenomenon. Jews would be considered one of the most privileged ethnic groups in the world today, and aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged. With such different cases, initial questions can be asked about the political consequences of the belief that “the Creator” has

²¹ www.afn.ca/main.asp?id=52 (accessed May 2010).

²² Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 62.

given a particular group special “rights and responsibilities”. How does such a belief lead the group to interact with others? Can the assertion that one is “chosen” be beneficial to the group itself and aid egalitarian social relations, or is it merely an ideology that justifies privilege, resulting in divisiveness and conflict?

Are There Particular Benefits of Chosenness?

One rationale, in support of the idea of chosenness, suggests that it benefits historically colonized or persecuted groups to believe that they have been selected by God for a higher moral purpose. Two reasons are given to exemplify this case; the first is that, in the case of oppressed people who have been denigrated and declared “inferior”, a belief in chosenness will raise their self-esteem and enable them to overcome the negative psychological effects associated with being dominated. Secondly, it is thought that the belief in chosenness enhances group cohesion, enabling historically oppressed people to bond together more effectively to fight against forces that destroy their integrity.

The first reason justifying chosenness – to raise the self-esteem of a historically denigrated group – is most prominent in the case of aboriginal peoples. This rationalization for Jewish chosenness occurs only occasionally. Jews, unlike the native population, have high levels of academic achievement, economic success, and social and political influence in the societies in which they live today; the idea of collective low self-esteem in the Jewish community is incomprehensible. However, some Jewish commentators, such as Mordecai M. Kaplan, the leader of the Reconstructionist Movement in Judaism, have claimed that the perception that Jews were specially chosen has been important for the group’s psychological health in the face of constant persecution.²³ Others have argued that the idea is “therapeutic” for dealing with historical trauma, such as in post-war America after the holocaust.²⁴

Aboriginal people, on the other hand, are the most disadvantaged ethnicity in North America, and so the relationship between the belief in chosenness and self-esteem is much more of a theme in the literature. According to this view, aboriginal traditions and culture are important for helping members of the native population to overcome the problems of poverty, violence and substance abuse that plague marginalized and isolated communities. Taiaiake Alfred, for example, maintains that many of the difficulties being experienced by aboriginal people today are due to a loss of traditional values. This is because Alfred sees these traditions as being an essential aspect of who aboriginal people actually are – a view based on the notion that they were chosen by the Creator to follow a particular path. Being assimilated, in Alfred’s view, means going against the divine order, resulting in social breakdown.²⁵

²³ Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), pp. 43-44.

²⁴ Andrew R. Heinze, “Peace of Mind (1946): Judaism and the Therapeutic Polemics of Postwar America”, *Religion and American Culture* 12(1), 2002, pp.31-58.

²⁵ Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Restoring traditional values so as to increase self-esteem is related to the second reason for supporting the idea of chosenness – fighting the forces that are threatening group integrity and exceptionalism. In studies of nationalism, it often has been noted that a nation constitutes an “imagined community” by cutting across cleavages to create solidarity within a sovereign and geographically defined territory.²⁶ Anthony Smith notes that “nationalist dreams [demand] action based on collective purposes and [excite] the emotions of those who share a common history and culture”,²⁷ and these collective purposes can be enhanced by myths about a common ancestry.²⁸ Religious beliefs also aid this process by “generat[ing] an enthusiasm and ‘effervescence’ which would forge a closely knit moral community of the faithful and the zealous, in which the individual would be incorporated, even absorbed, by the community”.²⁹

With respect to aboriginal people, it is maintained that colonization occurred because aboriginal cultures were devalued, enabling Europeans to demobilize the native population and establish sovereignty over them.³⁰ As Angela Wilson asserts, “if Indigenous cultural traditions had been deemed to be on equal ground with the colonizer's traditions, colonialist practices would have been impossible to rationally sustain”.³¹ This conception is consistent with the postcolonial writings of Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Paulo Freire, which maintain that colonization requires the colonized to believe in their cultural inferiority.³² Consequently restoring pride in one's culture, which would be enhanced by the belief that one is chosen, is essential in overcoming colonization.

This view also supports the idea that it is important to recognize and respect “indigenous knowledge”. Many aboriginal commentators maintain that their “knowledge” is related to chosenness. Native “ways of knowing” are “special” – i.e. religiously/spiritually inspired. Willie Ermine, Raven Sinclair and Madisun Browne, in a report on “indigenous research ethics”, for example, note that

the gifts of knowledge that the people possess are special...because they have been obtained through a special covenant the people have with the Creator and Mother Earth. Special gifts of knowledge held by people in the communities are often obtained through traditional and

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 144-145.

²⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 22.

²⁸ Walker Connor, *Ethno-Nationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

²⁹ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 27.

³⁰ Leanne R. Simpson, "Anticolonial Strategies for the Recovery and Maintenance of Indigenous Knowledge", *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28(3&4), 2004, p. 377.

³¹ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "Introduction: Indigenous Knowledge Recovery is Indigenous Empowerment", *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28(3&4), 2004, p. 360.

³² See, for example, Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1998). For an application of these ideas to the recognition of indigenous knowledges, see Glen Coulthard, "Indigenous peoples and the politics of recognition", *New Socialist*, 58, September-October 2006, pp. 9-12; George J. Sefa Dei, "Rethinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy", *NALL Working Paper*, 58, 2002; and Riyad Ahmed Shahjahan, "Mapping the Field of Anti-Colonial Discourse to Understand Issues of Indigenous Knowledges: Decolonizing Praxis", *McGill Journal of Education*, 40(2), 2005.

spiritual processes. The Elders said that sacred knowledge is Creator inspired and is to be cherished as a gift given to the people for their own use. This knowledge, commonly tied to the practices of sacred performance but not limited to that domain, is entrusted to the people to maintain and protect as a responsibility.³³

It is argued that believing that knowledge is inspired by “the Creator” will give the native population the collective strength to resist colonization. This is related to the fact that a number of aboriginal people, including prominent indigenous educators like Marie Battiste,³⁴ argue that culture, knowledge, and spirituality are tied to their ancestry, and therefore unchangeable. “Indigenous knowledge” is believed to be the “original directions [by the Creator] given specifically to our ancestors” and that colonization is resisted “by carrying that knowledge into the present”.³⁵ It is argued that the “relationship with Creation and its beings was meant to be maintained and enhanced and the knowledge that would ensure this was passed on for generations over thousands of years”.³⁶ These assumptions, in fact, explain why some aboriginal peoples are opposed to the “spread of white-minded [scientific] thinking” within the native population.³⁷

Aboriginal conceptions of chosenness are also perceived to increase the strength that is needed to resist colonization by justifying group rights to lands and resources. This viewpoint has been expressed by the Wasáse movement.³⁸ The Wasáse movement believes that various Canadian resources were “inherited” by indigenous people from their ancestors, and that they have a “basic right and responsibility to protect and defend their lands”.³⁹ The belief that “the Creator has given [aboriginal peoples] responsibility for a particular territory”,⁴⁰ and that aboriginal people have a “sacred responsibility to rise up and fight so that [aboriginal] people may live again as Onkwehonwe [original people]”,⁴¹ gives aboriginal people a greater impetus in demanding that settler populations respect their rights. Acceptance of the idea of chosenness, therefore, is seen as being beneficial to the native population because it justifies the efforts of the indigenous sovereignty movement to reclaim the lands that they argue have been historically stolen from them.

³³ Willie Ermine et al., “Kwayask itôtamowin: Indigenous Research Ethics”, Report of the Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre to the Institute of Aboriginal Peoples’ Health and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (Saskatoon: Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre, 2005), p. 6.

³⁴ See, for example, Marie Battiste, “Enabling the Autumn Seed: Toward a Decolonized Approach to Aboriginal Knowledge, Language, and Education”, *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 22(1), 1998, p. 17.

³⁵ Wilson, “Introduction”, p. 361.

³⁶ Deborah McGregor, “Coming Full Circle: Indigenous Knowledge, Environment, and Our Future”, *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28(3&4), 2004; See also R. Cruz Begay, “Changes in Childbirth Knowledge”, *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28(3&4), 2004.

³⁷ Wendy Hart-Ross and Deborah Simmons, “Wasáse FAQs”, *New Socialist*, 59, November-December 2006.

³⁸ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous pathways of action and freedom* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005).

³⁹ Taiaiake Alfred and Lana Lowe, “What are warrior societies?”, *New Socialist*, 58, September/October 2006, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Frances Abele, “Between Respect and Control: Traditional Indigenous Knowledge in Canadian Public Policy”, in Michael Orsini and Miriam Smith (eds), *Critical Policy Studies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

⁴¹ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse*, p. 2.

With respect to Jewish conceptions of chosenness, this idea is often used to support the formation of Israel. Israel, it is argued, is needed because of the constant attempts throughout history to persecute the Jews. These assertions maintain that Christians and Muslims have either attempted to assimilate, exterminate or expel Jews from their areas of control. Although Christian persecution of the Jews is often explained in terms of the belief that the Jews killed Christ,⁴² this cannot account for Muslim antagonism. Another explanation is the fact that Christianity and Islam are what Professor Max Müller referred to as “missionary religions” - religions that have attempted “to proselytize those who did not by birth belong to the spiritual aristocracy of their country”.⁴³ Since Judaism is non-missionary and Jews resist conversion, in order to survive as a people Israel is needed to provide a safe haven for a constantly oppressed minority.

An even more prominent explanation given for ongoing Jewish persecution is what has been referred to misleadingly as “anti-Semitism”.⁴⁴ Opposition to Judaism is perceived as a mythical disease, recurring at various periods in our history, but never fully conquered like the plague or other contagions. It is generally acknowledged as a permanent fixture of the human condition, in temporary repose, destined to rise in a wave of abhorrent destruction from which the only protection is perpetual vigilance. This is argued to be an aspect of the moral burden of chosenness.

Can Chosenness be Socially Beneficial?

But chosenness is not only examined in terms of how it impacts the groups who believe that they are chosen. The belief is also perceived to benefit humanity as a whole. It is maintained that chosenness, by ensuring that the chosen group remains pure, is in the interest of all people. This is because separation and exclusion enables those with superior qualities and greater moral obligations to provide leadership and cultural contributions to those who have not been chosen.

Arguments maintaining that the idea of chosenness has wide social benefits essentially are an extension of conservative ideology.⁴⁵ One of the main assumptions of conservatism is that

⁴² William Nicholls, *Christian anti-semitism: a history of hate* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993). Nicholls maintains that this belief has become “secularized” leading it to pervade modern European and North American culture.

⁴³ Alfred Comyn Lyall, *Asiatic Studies, Religious and Social* (BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2008), pp. 65-6. Non-missionary religions, in which Müller included Judaism, Brahmanism, and Zoroastrianism, tend to “repel intruders” and some “even punished those of other creeds who happened to be near enough to hear their prayers, or to see their sacrifices”.

⁴⁴ The term is misleading because it is used in the context of persecution against Jews, not Semites more generally. In fact, Arabs who espouse anti-Jewish sentiments are often labelled “anti-Semites”, even though Arabs are themselves Semites. This is an attempt to imply that all opposition to Judaism is racist, even when the criticism is directed at the religion. For a discussion of this point, see Wendy Campbell, “Anti-Jew vs. Anti-Zionism or Both”, www.jewishtribalreview.org/campbell2.htm (accessed May 2010).

⁴⁵ Although Samuel P. Huntington notes that there are a number of “theories” of conservatism, the aristocratic variant stipulates that societies are naturally divided into classes, and it is important that the nobility exert political control over commoners. Huntington, “Conservatism as an Ideology”, *The American Political Science Review* 51(2), 1957, p. 454.

societies are naturally divided into classes, and it is in the best interest of all that the “best” should rule. In feudal times, “best” was synonymous with the aristocracy; in other periods, leadership would not necessarily be associated with heredity but instead could stress factors such as intelligence, moral character, or wealth. In the case of the latter, conservatism is often justified on the basis that accumulated wealth has enabled rich men to contribute to the development of civilization through the ages, mostly as benefactors to art, literature and science, and therefore “to some extent, civilization is furthered by social injustice”.⁴⁶ Conservatism, therefore, is contrary to modern democratic ideals, where it is deemed to be ethically necessary for individuals to have an equal opportunity to acquire what is socially valued.

“Covenantal chosenness”, therefore, is profoundly conservative in its assumptions. It maintains that that a particular people’s covenant with God concerns not only their fate, but that of the whole world. As Anthony Smith points out,

the fulfillment of the covenant is seen as the vital element in bringing about global salvation. By fulfilling ‘our’ part of the covenant, ‘we’ benefit not just ourselves, but the whole world, because we advance God’s plan of salvation. The chosen people act as a model or *exemplum* of what it means to be holy, and hence like God. And to be like God is to be free of sin and death, and thereby to be eternally saved. The ultimate purpose of the covenant is, therefore, global salvation; and so we may say that the doctrine of divine election harnesses universalism to particularism, and makes the salvation of all hinge on the conduct of a special few.⁴⁷

Aviel Roshwald similarly notes that “being singled out for God or History’s special favor is commonly interpreted as imposing a special set of ethical constraints and obligations, upon the fulfillment of which the privileges of chosenness are conditioned. In this view, chosen nations are required to uphold elevated standards of social justice and political perfection with a view to shaping the world in their image”.⁴⁸ To maintain these exacting standards that the rest of humanity can emulate, however, “a sharp boundary between [the chosen] and others” is often required to “maintain a spiritual purity that can serve as an inspiration...”.⁴⁹

It has been noted earlier that a fundamental precept of Jewish covenantal chosenness is that Jews must meet higher moral standards than gentiles, and that this example can be followed by the latter. Rabbi Norman Lamm, for example, a Modern Orthodox leader, says that Jewish spirituality contains two complementary functions – “Goy Kadosh” (holy nation) and “Mamleket Kohanim” (kingdom of priests). The former concerns the separateness that Jews must maintain “to achieve collective self-transcendence”, while the latter “implies the obligation of this brotherhood of the spiritual elite toward the rest of mankind”, which would involve teaching others how to follow the Jewish example.⁵⁰

⁴⁶Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Touchstone, 1967), p. 613.

⁴⁷Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 51.

⁴⁸Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism*, p. 183.

⁴⁹Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism*, p. 184.

⁵⁰“The State of Jewish Belief – A Symposium”, *commentarymagazine.com*, August 1996 (accessed May 2010).

The need to keep separate so as to provide a good example for others is also related to the formation of the modern state of Israel. It has been argued that “all nations may be blessed in and through Israel”, which is why the Jewish state can be perceived as “a light unto the nations”.⁵¹ This line from the Bible, in fact, was cited by Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion, as a rationale for its emergence.⁵² Ben-Gurion asserted that “the ‘genius’ and uniqueness of the ‘Hebrew People’” would enable the Jews to lead other people. The uniqueness of the Jews stemmed from the fact that they were “the sole people that had remained intact from the ancient world” and “had always had to fight to overcome the many obstacles to its physical and spiritual survival”.⁵³ For Aaron David Gordon, “Israel had to acknowledge its destiny to be an exemplary nation; it had to become an ‘Am-Adam’ (literally, a ‘people-man’), or ‘people-humanity’ – that is, a people embodying humanity, who would infuse its institutions and outlook with morality and reverence for nature”.⁵⁴

In addition to providing an indirect form of leadership, the exclusivity that comes with chosenness is also defended by the claim of cultural contributions that have been made by Jewish political leaders, scientists, artists and entertainers. The separateness created by chosenness has enabled Jewish culture to flourish, and all have benefitted from the intellectual developments that have been made possible by Jews self-identifying as “people of the book”.

This view reinterprets chosenness, not as being a form of particularism but as a means of enhancing universalism and cooperation. Lothar Kahn, for example, maintains that “true universalism, according to [one Jewish] school of thought can’t occur without each human family contributing its individuality to the whole race of men. The Jew can best become a Frenchman or German -- a citizen of the world -- by perfecting the Jewishness in him.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Will Herberg notes that “Jewish particularism, because it transcends every national and cultural boundary, becomes, strangely enough a vehicle and witness to universalism”.⁵⁶ In other words, Herberg maintains that the extension of Jewish solidarity with one another is a form of “universalism.” Chosenness, according to this view, does not constitute “superiority”. It is maintained, in fact, that it is somewhat easier to fall short of the mark for a Jew than for a non-Jew because of failure to live up to these extra responsibilities.

As with Jewish chosenness, it is also emphasized that aboriginal peoples’ relationship to “the Creator” is beneficial for humanity as a whole. This argument, too, asserts that the native population has ideas and values that non-aboriginal people can emulate. It is assumed, for example, that “peace, kindness, sharing and trust” or “respect, responsibility, obligation, compassion, balance, wisdom, caring, sharing and love” are fundamental aboriginal “legal

⁵¹ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 59.

⁵² Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism*, p. 183.

⁵³ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 91.

⁵⁵ Lothar Kahn, *Mirrors of the Jewish Mind: A Gallery of European Jewish Writers of Our Time* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961, p. 30).

⁵⁶ Will Herberg, “The ‘Chosenness’ of Israel and the Jews of Today”, in Arthur A. Cohen (ed), *Arguments and Documents: A Reader of Jewish Thinking in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 276.

inheritances”,⁵⁷ while “indigenous ethics” are asserted to involve “justice, peace, respect, reciprocity, and accountability”.⁵⁸ As a result, there is the perception that aboriginal peoples are natural socialists, feminists and environmentalists. It is common to hear that, before Europeans arrived in North America, wealth was shared, women were “respected”, and people lived in harmony with the environment. Taiaiake Alfred, for example, maintains that “at the time of first contact with Europeans, the vast majority of Native American societies had achieved true civilization: They did not abuse the earth; they promoted communal responsibility; they practiced equality in gender relations; and they respected individual freedom”.⁵⁹

The most significant example that can be followed by non-aboriginals concerns aboriginal peoples’ “spiritual relationship to the land”. It is maintained that to “fulfil the role of steward assigned to them by the Creator,” aboriginal peoples developed customs, rules, laws, and even institutions that ensured environmental sustainability.⁶⁰ Winona LaDuke also maintains that “cyclical” thinking in aboriginal spiritual beliefs – that spiritual forces will hold them to account in the future for any transgressions made against nature today – imparts an ecological consciousness.⁶¹

This assumption about aboriginal peoples’ natural environmental consciousness results in proposals for both a direct and indirect leadership role for the native population. Directly, the argument that aboriginal people were assigned the position of environmental custodians or stewards by the Creator supports aboriginal demands for land claims and self-government. Flowing from this argument is the idea that the environmental crisis is a direct result of aboriginal peoples’ loss of land and political autonomy. The historical expropriation of native lands has meant that they can no longer exercise their spiritually assigned role of managing the environment. Therefore, it is necessary to return control over development to aboriginal groups so that they can resume their leadership role as spiritual environmental custodians.

Indirectly, it is maintained that non-natives should “listen to the elders” and study native societies so that we can all learn to live in a more environmentally sustainable society.⁶² Academics are encouraged to “ensure that Native philosophies and ways of knowing about the

⁵⁷ James [Sakéj] Youngblood Henderson, “First Nations’ Legal Inheritances in Canada: The Mikmaq Model,” *Manitoba Law Journal* 23 (January 1996) and John Borrows, *Indigenous Legal Traditions*, report prepared for the Law Commission of Canada (January 2006), p. 60.

⁵⁸ Leanne Simpson, “Looking after Gdoo-naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships”, *Wicazo Sa Review*, Fall 2008, p. 29.

⁵⁹ Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, p. 45.

⁶⁰ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [Final Report]*, vol. 2: 2, chapter 4, section 3.2; E.E. Sherry and H.M. Myers, “Traditional Knowledge in Practice,” *Society and Natural Resources* 15, no. 4 (2002): 354; Sherrie Blakney, “Aboriginal Forestry in New Brunswick,” *Environments* 31, no. 1 (2003); Ian Keay and Cherie Metcalf, “Aboriginal Rights, Customary Law and the Economics of Renewable Resource Exploitation,” *Canadian Public Policy* 30, no. 1 (March 2004), pp. 3–5.

⁶¹ LaDuke, “Social Justice, Racism, and the Environmental Movement.”

⁶² Peter Knudston and David Suzuki, *The Wisdom of the Elders* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993).

land and Creation are taken seriously”, so that we can “generate a holistic understanding of events and ideas”.⁶³

In addition to a direct and indirect leadership role, aboriginal chosenness is perceived as being beneficial to all of humanity for the social contributions made by the special character of aboriginal culture. One of the most significant areas in this regard concerns “indigenous knowledge” (also called “traditional knowledge”). Putting the adjective “indigenous” in front of “knowledge” is to argue that aboriginal people have special insights about reality not available to others. Its essence is the overarching assumption that aboriginal peoples, because of their ancestry, have a special “world view” or way of understanding reality that makes them intrinsically different from everyone else.

The extensive literature promoting indigenous knowledge maintains that it constitutes a “tremendous insight,” providing “more and sometimes better information” that is of “greater breadth and depth” than existing scientific data.⁶⁴ The information provided from this source, it is argued, will improve resource management processes and contribute to environmental sustainability.⁶⁵ The incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the educational system is also promoted on the basis that it will impart “valuable insights and teachings in areas such as astronomy, medicine, pharmacology, biology, mathematics, and environmental studies, to name a few”.⁶⁶

The Contradiction of Chosenness and Universalism

But if an essential aspect of chosenness is to achieve “purity through separation”,⁶⁷ so that the chosen can provide moral leadership to humanity as a whole, how are the non-chosen supposed to emulate their example? Although the conservative ideal is that a particular class must keep itself separate so that it can maintain the characteristics that it needs to lead others, these characteristics are perceived as being due to the notion that the former is somehow “special”. In the case of the chosen, God is supposed to have singled out the group because they have capacities that others do not have. And if the non-chosen do not have these capacities, how can they hope to meet these higher moral standards?

⁶³ Yale Belanger, *Ways of Knowing: An Introduction to Native Studies in Canada* (Toronto: Nelson, 2010), pp. 2-18.

⁶⁴ Stephen C. Ellis, “Meaningful Consideration? A Review of Traditional Knowledge in Environmental Decision Making,” *Arctic* 58, no. 1 (2005), pp. 66–77; Henry P. Huntington, “Using Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Science: Methods and Applications,” *Ecological Adaptations* 10, no. 5 (October 2005), pp. 1270–4; Brenda Parlee et al., “Using Traditional Knowledge to Adapt to Ecological Change: Denesoline Monitoring of Caribou Movements,” *Arctic* 58, no. 1 (2005), p. 26; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [Final Report]* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1996), vol. 1, p. 640.

⁶⁵ Paul Sillitoe, “The Development of Indigenous Knowledge: A New Applied Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 2 (1998), p. 226; Fikret Berkes et al., introduction to *Navigating Social Ecological Systems* edited by Fikret Berkes et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and P. O’B. Lyver and Lutsel K’e Dene First Nation, “Monitoring Barren-Ground Caribou Body Condition with Denesoline Traditional Knowledge,” *Arctic* 58, no. 1 (2004), pp. 44–5.

⁶⁶ RCAP, *Final Report*, 4, p. 128.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, pp. 63-4.

This is the contradiction between “universalism” and “particularism”, or “pluralism” and “election”, identified by a number of Jewish thinkers. Often perceived as a “Jewish apologetic”, it is implied that such an argument has been developed, after the fact, to make chosenness more palatable to the non-chosen.⁶⁸ After the Enlightenment and the development of the individualistic notion of the rights of man, it became increasingly difficult to accept the conservative idea that some groups had to meet higher moral standards, and therefore should be privileged over others.

The increasing prominence of enlightenment values led to the development of Reconstructionist Judaism. This movement rejected the idea of chosenness as “morally untenable” because it was felt to “[imply] the superiority of the elect community and the rejection of others”. Its founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, maintained that the doctrine of chosenness is based on an assumption of national or racial superiority, which inevitably creates divisiveness between the chosen and non-chosen and suspicion of the former by the latter.⁶⁹ This divisiveness and suspicion, in fact, creates fertile soil for the continuous persecution of those who claim to be chosen.

But what about the cultural contributions made by groups who perceive themselves to be chosen? As has been alleged with respect to Jewish and aboriginal people, a separation from others has facilitated the development of insights, values, and practices that have made, or have the potential to make, a contribution to humanity as a whole.

Two questions can be asked with respect to this assertion. The first is whether one actually believes in the idea of chosenness or not. As political scientists, are we really expected to believe the mythology of the Old Testament or the creation myths of various aboriginal groups? As authors like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett have shown, there is no convincing evidence for the existence of a supernatural supreme being, and therefore the idea that a particular group is “chosen” cannot form the basis of our understanding of the role of different groups in society.

Secondly, even if one does not accept the validity of the idea of the existence of God, can we really state that the belief in chosenness is responsible for these purported cultural contributions? Wouldn't Einstein's theory of relativity, Freud's understanding of the subconscious, Kafka's novels, and Mahler's compositions have been possible in the absence of this belief? And with respect to the aboriginal population, the idea of their chosenness has distorted an actual understanding of their historical egalitarianism and environmental sustainability. These practices were due to the small size, lower productivity and simple character of their societies, not to any belief in their chosenness.

A belief in one's chosenness, in fact, has profoundly socially negative implications because it gives groups an unrealistic understanding of the role that they play in society. As will be shown below, the idea of chosenness leads those who believe they are chosen to become narcissistic and

⁶⁸ Arnold M. Eisen, *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Religious Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 21.

⁶⁹ Arnold M. Eisen, “The rhetoric of chosenness”, *Society* 28(1), November 1990.

arrogant. In addition, because ideas of chosenness are inherently exclusive, they provide the justification for the oppression of one group by another.

The Creation of Narcissism and Arrogance

Although it is hard to see how chosenness, because of its aristocratic assumptions, exclusivity and divisiveness, can be a benefit to those who are not chosen, what about the argument that it will be beneficial to the groups who perceive themselves as chosen? Does the public promotion that a group is actually “chosen” raise their self-esteem and give them increased social cohesion so as to neutralize conflict? Is “chosenness” a necessary evil that must be accepted so as to eventually achieve equality in society?

With respect to Jewish conceptions of chosenness, this argument is not applicable. It does not make sense to say that this belief can help Jews to increase their social cohesion to neutralize conflict since chosenness is the defining characteristic of Jews. Therefore, the belief predates any historical conflicts, and so this identity, if it is to be considered at all, would have been a cause, not a consequence of the opposition that they faced. There is also a fundamental problem with relating notions of inequality and low self-esteem to Jews. They are not subject to “inequality” in societies anywhere. They are actually privileged in most cases, receiving the highest income of any ethnically determined group, and hold positions of power and influence through philanthropy and political donations.⁷⁰

In the case of aboriginal people, assumptions about inequality and low self-esteem are applicable, but it is not clear how promoting the idea of indigenous chosenness will address these problems. Self-esteem is the healthy satisfaction of social contribution, self-control, and the capacity to accept criticism. It is created through accomplishment and social conscience, and cannot be artificially generated. Promoting the myth that certain people are chosen while others are not creates a sense of superiority and entitlement amongst the former, as well as an indifference to the plight of others. A group’s belief in its chosenness sets it apart from others and inhibits critical examination of the social consequences of its actions. There is a smug belief that, because of a special relationship to “the Creator”, the group’s actions will carry a moral sanction denied to others.

For those aboriginal people who accept the belief that they are “special”, there is a reluctance to accept that a culturally authentic person could be engaged in antisocial activities. It is not possible for an aboriginal person to be responsible for oppressing others, because it is believed that indigenous people, because of their relationship to “the Creator”, are predisposed to exude kindness and to engage in caring and sharing. When an aboriginal person acts contrary to this, according to the logic of chosenness, it is because they have moved away from the original teachings bestowed upon them. It is the influence of non-aboriginals that must be to blame for the problems being faced. As a result, it is argued that aboriginal communities do not need the laws and institutions required by others to constrain abuses of power. It is not necessary for the

⁷⁰ For a discussion of this see Steven Silbiger, *The Jewish Phenomenon: Seven Keys to the Enduring Wealth of a People* (Longstreet Press, 2000) and John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

Charter of Rights and Freedoms to operate in aboriginal communities, and economic activities can be pursued without the constraints of environmental protection regulations.

In addition to the arrogant belief that the aboriginal relationship to “the Creator” makes them immune from faults present in other, especially “Western”, cultures, chosenness encourages an identification with the past. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to examine aboriginal pre-contact history objectively and without political interference. Attempts have been made to prevent aboriginal skeletal remains from being studied, as the findings could challenge native mythology.⁷¹ Cooperation has also been withheld in the genetic mapping of humanity from Africa to the Americas. The Human Genome Diversity Project, which was attempting “to trace the evolution and migration of different human populations, with the hope of creating a definitive ‘family tree’ of human populations”, has been opposed by some aboriginal representatives.⁷² This opposition occurred to prevent facts from being put forward about native migrations that could challenge the idea that “the Creator” made them custodians of particular lands “from the beginning of time”.

With respect to Jewish chosenness, arrogance is expressed through the repetitive documentation of the accomplishments of people with Jewish ancestry. Barbara Amiel, for example, in contemplating “why the Jews have been hated with such persistence in so many cultures over so many centuries”, comes to the following conclusion: “it’s hard to think of any political or artistic movement in which Jews have not been statistically overrepresented”. She goes on to state that “Jews seem to have the instincts of moths to a flame—a fatal attraction to the limelight of the leading edge”. Because these ideas have included “as much bad as good”, Amiel maintains that this is the likely source of why Jews “are so often disliked”.⁷³

Although Amiel might seem extreme in her promotion of Judaism, this notion that Jewish people are inclined to be drawn towards intellectual pursuits is common; there is also a tendency to link this circumstance to genetic characteristics. Even Solomon Schindler, a radical reformist Rabbi, maintained that “it remains a fact that we spring from a different branch of humanity, that *different* blood flows in our veins, that our temperament, our tastes, our humor is different from yours; that, in a word, we differ in our views and in our modes of thinking in many cases as much as we differ in our features”.⁷⁴

The idea that Jews are special – that they “spring from a different branch of humanity” - results in profound narcissism. There can only be one “holocaust”, for example, because Jewish suffering is greater than the suffering of all others.⁷⁵ This view, according to Norman

⁷¹ For a discussion of this see *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry*, p. 70.

⁷² “The Human Genome Diversity project”, GenEthics News Issue 11, www.hgalert.org/topics/personalInfo/hgdp.htm (accessed May 2010).

⁷³ Barbara Amiel, “Jews and Sunshine”, *Maclean’s*, September 17, 1999.

⁷⁴ Cited in Kevin MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in the Twentieth Century International and Political Movements*. (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1998), p. 157.

⁷⁵ See “Holocaust Creationism”, *The Nation*, July 12, 1999 for a discussion of this point.

Finkelstein, indicates an insensitivity towards the oppression that is endured by other groups.⁷⁶ The idea that fascism was exclusively concerned with exterminating Jews is promulgated through the creation of numerous Holocaust symposiums, museums and education centres. This revision of history obscures the fact that the Nazis were intent on oppressing and exterminating a number of groups – homosexuals, gypsies, communists, and all other non-Aryans.⁷⁷ Many young people today believe that World War II was fought over the Jewish question rather than the battles of imperialists for world economic domination.

The notion that Jews are inexplicably perpetual victims of oppression also inhibits the criticism of Jewish actions towards Gentiles. This is a fundamental problem with the idea of chosenness. Because chosenness is exclusive and separates groups who are “chosen” from those who are not, there is no way for this belief system to move towards a more egalitarian and socially just vision for humanity. One is either oppressed or an oppressor in the doctrine of chosenness since “the covenant idea is the polar opposite of democracy, multiculturalism, and ethnic equality”.⁷⁸

Continuing the Cycle of Persecution

When chosenness is assumed to exist, treating others differently is legitimized, and those who are chosen feel justified in their privileged position. The notion that one group has entitlements that another doesn't has been a source of conflict historically. It has been recognized that “British, French, Dutch, and Japanese conceptions of chosenness aggravated the self-righteous zeal and casual cruelty with which members of those nations carried out their colonial conquests”, and that the Israelites' perception of their chosenness was “invoked as a justification for the violent dispossession of the indigenous Canaanite inhabitants of the Promised Land”.⁷⁹

One particularly important example of the relationship between notions of chosenness and oppression involves apartheid in South Africa. What originally gave the Boers greater strength to fight the British, was turned on its head and used to justify the oppression of the black population. As Anthony Smith points out,

in the racially defined context of imperialism, to be of the elect was also increasingly to embrace a destiny of ethnic superiority and rule over the Africans, the non-elect. That way, the chosen could preserve their distinctive lifestyle and fulfill their destiny while simultaneously exploiting the labour of those excluded from the elect. This was of crucial importance to the Afrikaner nationalists, at a time when support for their more radical and exclusive ideologies was ebbing. The impact of such doctrines, and of the

⁷⁶ Finkelstein points out that “two central dogmas underpin the Holocaust framework: (1) the Holocaust marks a categorically unique historical event; (2) the Holocaust marks the climax of an irrational, eternal gentile hatred of Jews”. According to Finkelstein, “a subtext of the Holocaust uniqueness claim is that the Holocaust was uniquely evil. However terrible, the suffering of others simply does not compare”. Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2000), pp. 41-2, 47.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Richard C. Lukas, “Why Do We Allow Non-Jewish Victims to be Forgotten”, www.holocaustforgotten.com/lukas.htm (accessed May 2010).

⁷⁸ Norman Cantor, *The Sacred Chain: the History of the Jews* (New York: HarperCollins, NY, 1994), p. 21; See also, Norman Cantor, *The Jewish Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁷⁹ Roshwald, *The Endurance of Nationalism*, p. 169.

voortrekker centenary celebrations, was to legitimize in the eyes of a wider Afrikaner constituency the growing racial divisions that had originated in British imperialist exploitation, and to naturalize, with the aid of particular interpretations of biblical genealogies, the subordination and exclusion of Africans in the burgeoning towns, to which they had been flocking since the 1910s. Here lay the basic contradiction of the subsequent regime of apartheid. A theology of liberation from oppression led, in a racialized society, to a new form of oppression by the liberated – a pattern that, while not inevitable, was to be repeated elsewhere, albeit in different ways.⁸⁰

The emergence of a “new form of oppression” can be seen in both the aboriginal and Jewish cases of chosenness. In the case of aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations, the idea of chosenness is often given expression in what has been called the “inherent right” of self-government. In an attempt to channel the resentment that already exists in aboriginal communities toward the “white man,” some aboriginal leaders have argued that natives should remain spiritually and culturally “pure” by developing separate institutions and “ways of life”. The result has been the oppression of those who do not have the required ancestral connections to reside in a particular area.

This circumstance can be seen in some of the recent developments with respect to the Mohawks of Kahnawake. In 1981, Kahnawake representatives passed a membership code that called for a moratorium on mixed marriages so as to maintain the “purity” of residents and evict those who were non-Mohawks. Kahnawake spokesman Joe Delaronde provided the following rationale: “We’re very concerned about protecting our identity because at a certain point, the Canadian government will look at us and say: ‘You are not even Indians’”. He justified this action on the basis of being “very proud of our heritage and protective about it” and “revitalizing the community”. Jean LeClair, an official with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, admitted that this was a “racial policy”, but justified the actions because intermarriage would risk the “disappearance” of the Mohawks.⁸¹ And although this action was protested by some Mohawk leaders, including Ellen Gabriel, the opposition was justified, once again, on the basis of Mohawk traditions. The narcissistic preoccupation with the practices of one’s ancestors, therefore, is relied on to determine the content of modern social interaction.

And this circumstance does not just pertain to the Mohawks. It also has been witnessed in the case of the Cree. The most extreme example of this reasoning emerged in a court case in 1993 where three Alberta Indian bands sued the federal government to prevent members who had been historically deprived of their Indian status from rejoining the band. To justify this exclusion, the bands maintained that giving status to others would destroy the cultural integrity of their communities. Chief Wayne Roan of the Ermineskin Band explained: “The moose and elk do not mate, that is the natural law ...Our elders have always said Cree should marry Cree to preserve the culture and way of life”.⁸²

⁸⁰ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 85.

⁸¹ Fabrice Hoss, “Mohawks kick everyone else off their land”, *Telegraph.co.uk*, www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/7359011/Mohawks-kick-everyone-else-off-their-land.html, March 3, 2010 (accessed May 2010).

⁸² Cited in Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception Behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), p. 107

Similar arguments have been put forward by Jewish settlers in the state of Israel. Because these settlers maintain that they were “chosen” to occupy areas that became inhabited by non-Jews, the expulsion of Arabs is justified, as well as the denial of their right to return. These actions have led some to characterize Israel as an “apartheid state”. Na’eem Jeenah, an academic from South Africa, defines apartheid “as a system of privileging and advantaging one group of people over others on the basis of race or ethnicity”,⁸³ and he maintains that such a circumstance does exist in Israel, especially with respect to the issues of citizenship and land ownership. With respect to citizenship, Jeenah points to the Law of Return.⁸⁴ In the case of land ownership, Jeenah asserts that Palestinian citizens of Israel are prohibited from owning or using land that is classified as “national”.

The idea of chosenness justifies the Israeli “preference” for “the Jewish character of the state not to be diluted by a sizeable non-Jewish community in their midst...”.⁸⁵ As a result, the most likely solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – creating a binational state where there “would be no official state religion, but Jews, Christians and Muslims would be able to practice their religion freely” – is impeded. Instead, the “two state solution” is the most common proposal, even though, as Perry Anderson has noted, what is being offered has no possibility of viability. There will be very limited resources and no major city or port on the Palestinian side,⁸⁶ as well as a “series of little islands with no contiguous territory, separated by Israeli settlements and roads policed by the Israeli Army”.⁸⁷ And even an ungenerous offer is unlikely to be realized because of the assumption “we have what we hold”.⁸⁸ As Jerome Slater has put it, “the passage of time not only creates new practical realities, it also creates new or at least more complex moral realities. This is not a matter of ‘might makes right’; rather, what began as might may evolve into right, or at least into rights”.⁸⁹ Anderson makes clear the implications of this assertion:

faced with such reasoning, the Revisionist tradition is more straightforward and consistent. Why not give might a little more time to do its work? If it is all right to take four-fifths of the country, what is wrong with finishing the job and taking the lot? God did not divide it, but gave it to us entire. Against the intellectual misery of the ‘peace process’, to which such post-Zionism forlornly clings, the argument of Eretz Israel is unanswerable.⁹⁰

⁸³Na’eem Jenah, “Apartheid Israel?”, http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/documents/ARISA/2002_M4_Jeenah.pdf (accessed May 2010).

⁸⁴The Law of Return “gives Jews anywhere in the world the right to request and be granted Israeli citizenship”, including “Jews who – and the majority of Israelis fall into this category – have no lineage relationship to Palestine”. Jeenah, “Apartheid Israel?”.

⁸⁵Jenab Tutunji and Kamal Khaldi, “A binational state in Palestine: the rational choice for Palestinians and the moral choice for Israelis”, *International Affairs* 73(1), 1997, p. 31.

⁸⁶Perry Anderson, “Scurrying Towards Bethlehem”, *New Left Review*, 10, July/August 2001, p. 26

⁸⁷Tom Segev, cited in Anderson, “Scurrying Towards Bethlehem”, p. 27.

⁸⁸Anderson, “Scurrying Towards Bethlehem”, p. 26.

⁸⁹Jerome Slater, ‘Can Zionism be Reconciled with Justice for the Palestinians?’, *Tikkun*, Vol 15. No 4, 2000, p. 25, quoted in Anderson, “Scurrying Towards Bethlehem”, p. 28.

⁹⁰Anderson, “Scurrying Towards Bethlehem”, p. 28.

Beyond Chosenness

Rationality attests that being chosen by a supernatural power, for any reason, is a myth. Yet the identity of various peoples and individuals is accepted on this contingency by otherwise rational people. In an increasingly secularized society, embracing evidence and skepticism, there remains an underlying acceptance of illogical and unsubstantiated mythology. In the case of human identities based on myths, there is a powerful social impetus to “respect” the views of others regardless of their absence of evidential support. This allows for the unrestrained promotion of superstition in its many manifestations.

One objectionable effect of this practice is that it disingenuously encourages the believers. Without honest intellectual debate, misinformation and erroneous data are reinforced by the implication of universal acceptance. The offensively condescending position by non-aboriginal academics, who themselves accept the theory of evolution, that aboriginal people were placed on “Turtle Island” by “the Creator”, for example, deprives the native population from acquiring scientific knowledge about human origins and the nature of life on this planet. This justifies aboriginal isolation, reinforcing their continued marginalization and dependency.

But the promotion of the belief in being chosen has broader social significance than that. The assumption and claim of chosenness breeds contempt and resentment among the non-chosen. Claims to be responsible for greater things than other sensible and morally responsible people means alienation from others, and this is often the justification for privilege. Demands for special influence in environmental preservation initiatives by aboriginal groups, based on their “special relationship to the land, given them by the creator”, enables native hunters to benefit from exaggerating whale and polar bear populations, causing tension with actual conservationists. And as was mentioned above, without the concept of Jewish chosenness, the reason for conflict in the Middle East would be greatly reduced. While the world sees the conflict in specifically political terms, the tacit rationalization goes back to the alleged promise of land to the Jewish people.

The result of chosenness’ promotion of intrinsic differences, therefore, is isolation from all others and perpetual social conflict. Instead of promoting this idea so as not to give “offence”, political scientists should be asking why we should wish to emphasize difference in the first place. When meeting socially, most people use small talk to find common interests with others. Those without anything in common quickly lose interest in one another, and further contact is unlikely. Different interests can make people interesting and a source of shared knowledge, but a focus on fundamental differences fosters isolation and antagonism.

Chosenness is actually a pre-national – i.e. tribal – form of social organization, and its combination with nationalism is a reactionary force. Human progress is made possible by cooperation, and ideas of chosenness impede this development. The future of humanity requires that we develop a species orientation. This means opposing myths that are intent on privileging different groups so that indefensible social consequences can be irrationally justified.