

Chosen Peoples, Chosen Nation

Henry Goldschmidt • Religious Studies • Wesleyan University

Course Rationale

This course is called “Chosen Peoples, Chosen Nation,” and it examines a number of social, political, and philosophical issues surrounding the concept of chosenness. The class starts from the Hebrew Bible, then touches briefly on debates over chosenness among both medieval and contemporary Jewish thinkers. However, its central focus is on the role of chosenness in popular understandings of U.S. American national identity, as well as the collective identities of many American religious and/or racialized communities. At the same time, the course has two broader theoretical, political, and pedagogical goals: 1) by focusing on the religious dimensions of U.S. American racial and national identities it encourages students to question the presumed secularity of their own beliefs and politics; and 2) more broadly, by tracing the common claims to divine chosenness advanced by diverse American communities it explores the relationships among race, nation, and religion as categories of collective identity formation. I will introduce the course by saying a bit more about these two goals, as well as their relationships to the specific student body of Wesleyan University, and the pedagogical challenges that have accompanied them in teaching the course.

Questioning the Secularity of American Modernity

By exploring the role of religious discourses in defining identities—like race and nation—that are typically imagined as secular and “modern,” students in the course are forced to question the taken-for-granted opposition between Western modernity and its religious others. This pedagogical goal speaks, quite specifically, to the backgrounds and assumptions of many students at Wesleyan University. Although it offers graduate degrees in a few fields, Wesleyan is, by and large, a small liberal arts college (with 2,700 undergraduate students). It is well known, and critiqued in some quarters, as a bastion of leftist thought, moral relativism, and (in the ridiculous catch-phrase of the right) “political correctness.” Although I hardly share this critique, I am concerned by the unquestioned ideological secularism of some Wesleyan students—their knee-jerk suspicion, if not blanket dismissal, of popular religious discourses and politics.

This is not generally a big problem among religion majors, or other students with an enduring interest in the study of religion, but “Chosen Peoples” is a seminar class (capped at 20 students), which is cross-listed in Religion and American Studies, and targeted at a broad audience of majors and non-majors. It attracts students with a wide range of scholarly interests—in American religion, Jewish studies, racial identity formation, and other fields—but many are also drawn to the course by a sense of concern, if not anger, over the growing role of religion in U.S. American domestic politics and foreign policy. In short, they’re not so fond of American pretensions to be a “chosen nation.” In this context, the pedagogical challenge is to explore—and critique—the

religious dimensions of contemporary politics without leading students to conclude that national identity is simply “primitive” or “irrational,” like religion is all too often imagined to be. For example, in a number of seminar discussions I have found myself defending the religious nationalism of the Bush administration (to which I hardly adhere) in an effort to push my students beyond their knee-jerk attacks to more subtle critiques.

Exploring the Intersections of Race, Nation, and Religion

By exploring how claims of divine chosenness and Israelite descent help to define the identities of diverse communities, students in the course develop an understanding of the tropes of identity formation that are shared—and contested—across the ever-shifting boundaries of Blackness, Whiteness, Jewishness, Christianness, and Americanness. The pedagogical challenge, however, is to explore the commonalities and relationships between and among these identities without leading students to conclude that they’re all just the same. The goal, in other words, is to interrogate the boundedness of identity categories, while simultaneously demonstrating their historical specificity.

In this sense, the course ultimately contributes to a growing critique of the reductive conceptual categories that Americans and others use to explain—and contain—the bewildering diversity of the social world. Most Wesleyan students are well schooled in a rather superficial form of “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” and they are generally willing to question their assumptions about specific racial or religious identities. But it is difficult for many students to interrogate the conceptual and historical foundations of familiar categories like “race,” “nation,” and “religion.” This course helps them do so by showing how these different forms of collective identity have all relied, in different ways, on comparable rhetorics of divine chosenness.

Wesleyan University, Spring 2006
Religion 210 • American Studies 216

Chosen Peoples, Chosen Nation

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Class Meetings:
Tues / Thurs, 1:10 - 2:30
in Fisk Hall, Rm. 412

Office Hours: Wed 10 - 12,
or other times by appointment

Course Description

This course will examine a range of social, political and philosophical issues surrounding the concept of “chosenness”—the belief that a particular community (usually one’s own) has been singled out by God for some special favor or purpose. We will trace the roots of this concept in the Hebrew Bible, and examine a number of religious communities (including orthodox Jews, Puritan settlers, Black Hebrew Israelites, and the Christian Identity movement) who have claimed divine chosenness through narratives of Israelite descent. Above all, however, we will examine the role of chosenness in popular understandings of American national identity—tracing the history of United States claims to be a “chosen nation,” and exploring the way these claims may shape contemporary American foreign policy. We will, in other words, explore the politics of chosenness from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob through George W. Bush.

Students will explore these questions through careful analyses of the course readings, active participation in seminar discussions, a series of short papers on the readings, and a longer final paper drawing on both course readings and independent research.

Required Readings

Four texts will be available to purchase at Broad Street Books, and on reserve at Olin:

Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement*. Chapel Hill: The U. of North Carolina Press, 1994.

Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: The U. of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 1997.

Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*. Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 1980.

A large packet of photocopied readings is also required, and will be available to purchase at Suburban Card and Gift (in Metro Square, off of Main Street) and on reserve at Olin. References for the essays in the reader will be found in the schedule of readings. Students will also need a Bible (any translation). There will be a few required Bible readings, and biblical texts will come up fairly often in class.

Please note: These are the texts I used when I taught the course in the spring of 2006. I've used others in the past, with mixed results. These additional / optional texts will be included in the relevant units of the course schedule below, marked as "see also."

Course Requirements

Reading: This is a reading intensive course, and some of the texts develop challenging theoretical analyses that will require intensive reading. You will need to keep up with the scheduled readings, read carefully, and come to every class with a solid grasp on the texts.

Attendance and Participation: Regular attendance and class participation are absolutely required. There is no way to grasp the themes of the course without active participation in class discussions. For this reason, I will take attendance in each class and structure the course to encourage—or perhaps require—your participation.

Short Papers and Discussion Questions: Over the course of the semester, you will write three papers on the course readings, of about 3-5 pages each. These will be scheduled in such a way that six or seven students will write papers at the end of each unit of the course (except the first one), or in the middle of longer units. In addition to your paper, you will prepare a question for class discussion (presumably on the issues you explore in the paper). The papers and questions will be due by 9 am on the relevant day of class. I'll circulate your questions in class, and I may ask paper writers to help facilitate discussion of their question. We will discuss my expectations for these papers and questions in more detail in class.

Final Research Papers: You will also write a 10-12 page research paper on any topic related to themes of the course, due during finals week, on May 16th. Your research paper may build on one of your papers on the course readings—expanding its scope through additional reading and research—or it can start fresh on a new topic. An abstract and preliminary bibliography for your paper will be due in class on April 20th. We will discuss my expectations for these papers in more detail in class.

Final Grades: Your grade in the course will be based on your three short papers (about 15% of the final grade each), your final research paper (about 30% of the final grade) and your attendance and class participation (about 25% of the final grade). This grading equation may not be precise, however, as I tend to grade assignments by an absolute standard, while determining final grades relative to the performance of the class.

Schedule of Readings

1/26 Introduction to the Course. No reading.

Unit 1: Introducing Chosenness, From Abraham to W.

1/31 Genesis ch. 12:1-9, Genesis ch. 17, Exodus chs. 19 - 20, Deuteronomy chs. 7 - 8, Isaiah chs. 42 - 43:15, Nehemiah chs. 9 - 10

2/2 Werner Sollors, "Typology and Ethnogenesis." In *Beyond Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford U. Press, 1986.

Nicholas Street, "The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness." In Conrad Cherry, ed. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1998.

George W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005. Available online.

Unit 2: Divine Chosenness and Israelite Identity in the Hebrew Bible

2/7 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, Forward, Introduction, and Chapter 1

Walter Moberly, "Are Monotheism and Election Bad For You?" Paper presented at the 2005 annual conference of the Society for Biblical Literature.

2/9 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, Chapters 2 and 4

2/14 Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, Chapters 3 and 5

Unit 3: Debating Chosenness Among Medieval and Modern Jews

2/16 Menachem Keller, "Chosenness, Not Chauvinism: Maimonides on the Chosen People." In Daniel Frank, ed. *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought*. Albany: State U. of New York Press, 1993.

Ze'ev Levy, "Judaism and Chosenness: On Some Controversial Aspects." In Daniel Frank, ed. *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought*. Albany: State U. of New York Press, 1993.

2/21 Arnold Eisen, "A Part and Apart." In *The Chosen People in America: A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology*. Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1983

Mordecai Kaplan, "The Chosen People Idea an Anachronism." In *The Future of the American Jew*. Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Press, 1981.

Will Herberg, "The 'Chosenness' of Israel and the Jew of Today." In Arthur Cohen, ed. *Arguments and Doctrines*, New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

see also: David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People*. Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1995.

Unit 4: The Puritan Settlers: New England as New Canaan

2/23 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, Chapters 1 - 3

2/28 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, Chapters 4 - 5 (ch. 6 optional)

Unit 5: Chosen Nation, Part One: America in the Age of Manifest Destiny

3/2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991. Chapters 1 - 2

Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*, New York, Oxford U. Press. Chapters 1 - 2

3/7 Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, Preface and Chapters 1 - 2 (ch. 3 optional)

3/9 Ernest Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, Chapters 4 - 5 (ch. 6 optional)

3/10 - 3/27 Spring Break.

Unit 6: Chosen Race, Part One: Black Israelites

3/28 Albert Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus and the American Israel." In *A Fire in the Bones*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Henry Goldschmidt, "Introduction: Race, Nation, and Religion." In Henry Goldschmidt and Elizabeth McAlister, eds. *Race, Nation, and Religion in the Americas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

3/30 Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Chapters 1 - 3

4/4 Yvonne Chireau, "Black Culture and Black Zion: African-American Religious Encounters With Judaism." In *Black Zion*, eds. Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Roberta Gold, "The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939." *American Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2003):179-225.

4/6 Barry Chevannes, "Introducing the Native Religions of Jamaica." In *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldview*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U. Press, 1998.

Laurence Breiner, "The English Bible in Jamaican Rastafarianism." In *The Journal of Religious Thought*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1985-6):30-43.

Carole Yawney, "Remnants of all Nations." In Frances Henry, ed. *Ethnicity in the Americas*. Hague: Mouton, 1976.

4/11 Henry Goldschmidt, "The Voices of Jacob on the Streets of Brooklyn: Black and Jewish Israelites in and around Crown Heights." In *American Ethnologist*, v. 33, n. 3 (2006):378-396.

William Levay, "Roots, Rock, Rebbe: Matisyahu and the Cultural Version." Unpublished manuscript.

see also: work on the Hebrew Israelites, Rastafarians, and other varieties of Black chosenness by Leonard Barrett, Eddie Glaude, James Landing, Theophus Smith, and many others

Unit 7: Chosen Race, Part Two: White Israelites

4/13 Kingdom Identity Ministries, "Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs." Available online.

Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, Preface, Chapters 1 and 4

4/18 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, Chapters 6 - 9

4/20 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right*, Chapters 10 - 13

see also: James Aho. *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990.

Unit 8: Chosen Nation, Part Two: America in the Age of the Bush Doctrine

4/25 Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" In Russell Richey and Donald Jones, eds. *American Civil Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Conrad Cherry, "Introduction" to *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Stephen Chapman, "Imperial Exegesis." In Wes Avram, ed. *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004.

George W. Bush, Address to congress on 9/20/01, and address to the nation on 9/11/02. Both available online.

4/27 George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, October 7, 2001. Appendix to Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 2003.

Osama bin Laden, Videotaped Address, October 7, 2001. Appendix to Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 2003.

Bruce Lincoln, "Symmetric Dualisms: Bush and bin Laden on October 7" In *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 2003.

5/2 Stephen Webb, *American Providence: A Nation With a Mission*. Continuum, 2006. Intro, Chaps 1, 2, 4, and Conclusion

5/4 Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005. Preface, Chapters 1, 2 and 8

5/9 National Security Strategy of the United States, September 17, 2002. Appendix to Wes Avram, ed. *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004.

Eugene McCarragher, "The Most Intolerable of Insults." In Wes Avram, ed. *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004.

see also: other chapters in Wes Avram (ed.), *Anxious about Empire* and Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*; as well as Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia (eds.) *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11*. Durham: Duke U. Press, 2003.