

a key premise of the Gaia theory, and avers that we humans are an “inextricable part” of that system. She opposes a Western concept of nature that is both non-human and non-divine (5) and claims that our ethical standards should reflect Gaia’s interdependency. Lynn Margulis and James Lovelock, she notes, have given us a new vision of the Earth through Gaia, in which cooperation is as important as competition:

Human ethics should be a more refined and conscious version of the natural interdependency, mandating humans to imagine and feel the suffering of others, and to find ways in which interrelation becomes cooperative and mutually life-enhancing for both sides (57).

For Ruether, both the Gaia theory of Lovelock and Margulis and the new cosmology of cultural historian Thomas Berry and mathematician Brian Swimme counter the Cartesian mechanistic view of nature, and help dissolve traditional dualisms that have had such a deleterious legacy for both women and nature. (She in fact gives a special thanks to Brian Swimme in her acknowledgments).

In this well-researched, encyclopedic-like study, Ruether, it seems, embraces much of the emerging scientific stories such as Gaia and the universe story, unpacking, however, more of their *ethical* than their *theological* implications. In outlining the human agenda in light of such scientific insights, Ruether rehearses ideas that others in the ecological movement have also advanced: bioregionalism, reduced population, organic farming, an end to militarism and destructive technologies, global economic justice, communities of solidarity and alternative lifestyles, and an ability to listen to nature (a chief feature of Thomas Berry’s thought) (265–272). Somewhat surprisingly, however, the theological questions posed by Gaia are not directly addressed, leaving us to anticipate further contributions.

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*God’s Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster.* By Donald Harman Akenson. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991. ISBN 0-7735-0940-2. Pp. vii+404.

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In volume 10 of McGill-Queen’s *Studies in the History of Religion*, Donald Akenson investigates three very different social groups which have much in common. What forces are at work in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster that propel each group to hang tenaciously on to their land? What ideology binds each of these groups together? How has this ideology shaped their individual national histories and their complex historiographies? What ancient paradigm forms the fundamental base metaphor that helps these people understand and deal with their world?

In order to answer these questions, *God’s Peoples* is divided into five parts, each dealing with a different aspect. Part I, “The Adamantine World,” explores the theoretical model upon which Akenson bases his analysis of the cultures of

South Africa, Israel, and Ulster in Parts II to IV, "Covenantal Cultures in the Making," "The Covenant and the State," and "The Covenant in Recent Times." Part V, "Envoi," addresses the important question of how policy-makers should approach people who adhere to a mode of thinking that is "invisible and about four millennia old" (354). Owing to the nature and importance of Akenson's theoretical model, and his unique observations of the inherent difficulties in understanding and relating to these three societies on the world's stage, this review will focus primarily on Parts I and V.

Endemic to these three societies is a conceptual grid which comprises two important aspects. The first is "covenant," particularly the ancient Hebrew covenant between Yahweh and Yahweh's people. Defining covenant as a bargain, Akenson argues that "the details of this agreement shift over time, but the kernel does not. If Israel will be his people, Yahweh will be their God" (13). As the conditional aspect of covenant is explored, Akenson notes that it is the "if-then" covenantal deal that is a "more complex relationship psychologically than it is legally" (16). He argues that the "if-then" aspect works both ways. If the people are Yahweh's holy servants, then he will bless them. Psychologically, the reverse causality is also true. A person, or an entire nation, may observe "that things are going well, that people are becoming rich and fecund, and thus will conclude: I (or we) must be righteous, for we are being blessed" (16). The "if-then" deal, when read seriously and often literally from scripture, forms the fundamental pattern of mind of these three societies. As a result, the covenant becomes a transparent reality. The ultimate "ground of human experience in the scriptures is this deal, the covenant, hard, inflexible, comprehensible" (20).

The second aspect of this conceptual grid is a "corporate personality." Akenson argues that the ancient Hebrews considered themselves a single personality, extending over time and including all members of the Chosen People, past, present, and future. Moreover, the idea of a corporate personality was flexible enough to be represented "at special moments in its history by a single individual who could embody in his own singular personality the corporate personality of the entire nation" (21). To Akenson, this concept of a corporate personality is manifested through key ideas found in the Hebrew scriptures: "seed" (i.e., reproduction and biology), circumcision, and blood purity. Each of these contributes to the perceptions or interrelated habits of the mind of a group who consider themselves a "Chosen People."

Akenson's thesis for a conceptual grid, within which the concepts of covenant, the use of scripture, and a corporate personality are drawn together, form the framework in which three motives serve as reflex points: the land, the Exodus, and blood sacrifice. Land, in the Hebrew scriptures, symbolizes past glory and future hope. The Israelites's first entry into the "Promised Land" was presaged by the great Exodus from Egypt. This is one of three stories that form the narrative tripod upon which the Hebrew scriptures rest (32). Blood sacrifice, as first evidenced in the passing over of the angel of death, is the third reflex point. All of these ingredients form a well-integrated conceptual grid. This is not, however, a passive grid. Akenson demonstrates that it is a historical "decision-making" matrix designed to make decisions about the real world. One feeds a "question

into it, and, integrating the given data and its accumulated library of experience, the scriptural grid can make a decision" (40). Because of its usefulness, efficiency, and all-encompassing nature, this grid has been preserved and maintained. Cultures that in any way "define themselves as being a Chosen People could appropriate and preserve the essence, if not the details, of the ancient Israelite system" (41).

Akenson concludes his theoretical argument with six pivotal observations. Societies that are most likely to react like the ancient Israelites by developing a similar conceptual grid do the following: (1) exhibit a mindset that places a good deal of emphasis upon social law, enforced through religious congregations; (2) draw sharp distinctions between themselves and their enemies; (3) envision a deity that is heavily anthropomorphized and warlike; (4) attach themselves to specific pieces of land considered as holy, as a Promised Land; (5) consider the motif of the Exodus with special emotional appeal; and (6) place great emphasis upon the concept of group purity, either religious or racial or both, drawing upon scriptural prohibitions on the mixing of their pure seed with the impure seed of lesser peoples. In short, Akenson argues that a covenantal society tends to be uncompromising, adamant and self-contained (42).

In Part V, "Envoi," Akenson considers the implications of this theoretical understanding of the covenantal grid in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster for policy-makers. The covenant of the ancient Hebrews, with all of its "legends, magical practices, obsessions, and taboos...forms the single most powerful cultural construct yet built by humankind: in fact, so strong is it that many people deal with it only by positing its origin as divine" (349). Akenson argues that ideas count, and that the ideas that count most are religious. Religion provides the constituents of "personal identity, the crucial sources of social integration, and the key to the nature of things" (354). The import of this observation reminds him of the significance of engaging in this religious sense whenever dealing with the "history" and the "present" of non-western cultures, and of cultures on the periphery of the west. Noting that the cultures of South Africa, Israel, and Ulster exist within today's world, Akenson offers several suggestions how the outside world should deal with those cultures that derive from the ancient Hebrew covenant.

Covenantal societies must be taken seriously. Denouncing them as hopelessly archaic, irrational, and morally benighted, is not going to work. They must be understood from within the viewpoint of the people. The observer would be wise to understand that a "given set of facts can have totally different meanings depending upon cultural context" (355). An important element in approaching the covenantal mindset is patience. These societies conceive time in "chunks," believing it can outlast any threat. The language of a covenantal culture is unique and vital to that society's self-understanding. To converse with it is to speak in its codes: the language of historical sequences, of law, and of "if-then" propositions. Geography is vital; the idea of Land is crucial. To ignore this concept is to ignore the very essence of these societies. Covenantal cultures tend to possess a consuming empiricism. The "if-then" mode of thought "means that they deal in terms of sequences of cause and effect; they continually test assertions of fact" (356). If one wants something from a covenantal culture, one must be precise in specifying

what it wants. Akenson's observation and statement that covenantal cultures of South Africa, Northern Ireland and Israel have been "painting their rocks green when someone wants to be shown a nice pasture" (356), is his most controversial statement. In support of this he notes that while all three adopted the trappings of liberal parliamentary democracy, with public election campaigns, secret ballots, and open parliamentary debates, the system has been "skewed so as to preclude democratic rights for, respectively, blacks, Roman Catholics, and Palestinians" (356).

Akenson's final recommendation points out that compromise within covenantal cultures is considered a sign of weakness. Time and distance must be granted in order for leaders to talk to themselves, and to their constituents, to become accustomed to the potential for change, and to convince themselves that the idea was theirs from the first. Akenson affirms that, as South Africa and Ulster have shown, societies can slowly redefine themselves and accept quite a radical change. In dealing with covenantal cultures, Akenson encourages people to think in terms of societies that conform to a covenantal "blueprint," a covenantal cosmology, based on the ancient Hebrew template. He warns, however, that this pattern may well become one the "most effective ways for small nations to fortify themselves" (357) in a world that is fast becoming more confusing.

Akenson's theoretical model of a covenantal grid assists the reader's understanding of the presuppositions, the root paradigms and the worldviews of the cultures of South Africa, Israel, and Ulster in their struggle to come to terms with the world around them. *God's Peoples* is an important book assessing the self-perceptions of three cultures, the basing of their identities on a narrowly focused understanding of the biblical texts, and the important role played by the Bible in the fundamental foundation upon which they have written their history and understood their world.

Moreover, Akenson's theories and models provide the reader with valuable insights into religious war in general and its consequent atrocities such as those inflicted upon and by the Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Bosnia. Akenson helps put into perspective the reasons the critical nature of the current negotiations between Britain and the Irish Republican Army, between Israel and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and Jericho, and the first free elections in South Africa. Based on sound scholarship, *God's Peoples* is written with vigour, supplying valuable critical apparatus and supplemental maps, charts and an index.

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*Postmodernism, Reason and Religion.* By Ernest Gellner. London: Routledge, 1992. ISBN 0-415-08024-X. Pp. ix+96.

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Judging by its title, one might expect in this volume a broad discussion of the relationship between reason and religion in light of the phenomenon of postmodernism, suitable, perhaps, to use for teaching undergraduates in the philosophy of