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## Review: 'Chosen Nation: Scripture, Theopolitics, and the Project of National Identity'

Mark Ryan

University of Dayton, mryan1@udayton.edu

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Commissioned by Tobias Winwright, Reviews Editor

**Braden P. Anderson, *Chosen Nation: Scripture Theopolitics and the Project of National Identity*. Eugene, Cascade Books, 2012. 280 pp. \$33.00. ISBN 13: 978-1-61097-392-2 (pbk).**

Reviewed by: Mark R. Ryan, Flora, IN. mrr5h@virginia.edu

Prominent theopolitical thinkers of recent decades, including Yoder, Hauerwas and Cavanaugh, have called attention to key ways in which the church loses its identity as a distinctive polis. Constantinian habits of thinking, liberalism's hostility to traditions ("no story but the story I choose for myself"), and the modern order's relegation of "religion" to a "private," over against a "public" sphere, have each been examined in association with the church's inability to be the church. But what role does the phenomenon of nationalism play in the church's going astray? This question, coupled with another—"In what ways is the church itself responsible for going astray from its true identity?"—is at the heart of Braden Anderson's important study. He strives to display how the formal study of nationalism both builds on and transforms theopolitical thought up to this day, especially by calling attention to internal (including, importantly, scriptural) sources of the distortion of the church's identity.

Nationalism is not merely a flag-waving celebration of an already given solidarity but "the process that leads to national identity in the first place."(xiii) By constructing narratives designed to authenticate a nation's "true self," nationalism galvanizes a public toward particular ends—in some cases distinctively theological ends. The identity so constructed shapes the politics, or "theopolitics", of the people in question. Nationalism studies as a discipline identifies the components of such identity-conferring narratives and helps analyze their dynamics in concrete cases.

Cavanaugh seems to be the primary point of reference for Anderson's overall argument. While Cavanaugh sees the church's distorted self-understanding as the result of pressures exerted by the categories of the secular mind—especially its extraction, and subsequent abstraction, of religion from politics—Anderson emphasizes a distorted theology propagated within the church. American Christian nationalism weaves together selected scriptures with strands of American history in creating a theopolitical identity.

Focusing on nationalism reveals that the construction and renewal of theopolitical identity can go on even when Christians are opposed to the government, as well as opening up the possibility of historical comparison between modern and pre-modern forms of Christian nationalism.

Chapter one of *Chosen Nation* surveys influential theopolitical thinkers for their strengths and limitations, while chapter two functions similarly in regard to key social scientific theories of nationalism. Before going on in chapters six and seven to case studies of American Christian nationalism, Anderson undertakes a constructive, theological account of the church's theopolitical identity culled from scripture. This account serves as a normative reference point for criticizing American Christian nationalism on theological grounds in chapters six and seven.

American Christian nationalism both draws upon Christian scripture and constitutes a species of idolatry, according to Anderson. Therefore, to critique it one must contrast it with a proper account of the God revealed in scripture as creator and redeemer. Crucially, this God has elected to reveal himself to the world through covenanting with a people who are to image God through their distinctive form of life—their “theopolitics,” if you will. There is thus in the biblical covenant a theological ground for the sort of inquiry a focus on nationalism makes possible—that is, one that attempts to account for the church’s own blame, and judgment, in this story-making. For this covenant has always included a role for God’s people—a role, that is, implied by the call to respond faithfully to God’s initiative in choosing them.

In other words, the covenant, as that relationship between God and Israel through which God’s intention is to make Israel a sign and mediator of God’s rule of all creation, is thus crucial to the ability of Israel—and, in continuity with Israel, Jesus Christ and his body, the Church—to avoid idolatry. The close identification or right worship and a practical way of life which covenant implies itself explains the use of the term “theopolitics.” It is a neologism made necessary by the fact that the modern mind’s tendency dichotomize “religion” and “politics” is bound to lead to misreadings of the scriptural account of God as creator and redeemer. In chapters four and five, then, Anderson examines key covenant narratives in the Old and New Testament through a theopolitical lens.

The account of the theopolitical identity of Israel/Church is key to Anderson’s critiques of two forms of American Christian nationalism in chapters six and seven. The problem at their roots is the betrayal of the church’s distinctive identity facilitated by a willful disregard of the particularity and singularity of God’s covenant with Israel in scripture. Israel, as God’s chosen people, is treated more like a concept or “template” than a literal reality, which can be abstracted and re-applied in much later historical contexts, like 17<sup>th</sup> century America. This takes the logic driving Paul’s description of the relation of the gentile church to Israel and stands it on its head.

I believe that lay persons willing to put in some work could profit from the book, while it will be valuably read by graduate students and professors in the field.

As Anderson admits, the account of theopolitics at the heart of this book serves mainly the purposes of critique.(253) It therefore leaves off at the point of relating membership in the church to the many narratives that contribute to the identities of Christians. Yet its convicting turn to the responsibility of Christians as God’s covenant partners may indicate a direction for further work. We might consider a path that plumbs the many narratives that claim us and the social practices they sustain as expressions of natural law—i.e. we could explore such narratives and practices as mediating God’s grace in ways that do not directly invoke the church. Or we might consider an approach that carefully inspects forms of contemporary life as potential vehicles for the principalities and powers. For instance, Brent Laytham’s *Ipod, You Tube, Wii Play* (Cascade, 2013) carries out such inspection with regard to our practices of entertainment and the technologies integral to them, using the church’s liturgical practices as a touchstone for discerning when and how we are becoming captivated by idols. While both, I think, are compatible with Anderson’s critique, his self-critical turn to the church may favor the latter.