



---

God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster. by Donald Harman Akenson

Review by: Jose Casanova

*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, No. 1 (Jul., 1994), pp. 247-249

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782545>

Accessed: 10/12/2012 15:20

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Riesebrodt also finds common causes of mobilization in both cases: “rapid urbanization and the socio-cultural pluralism associated with it; the dramatic processes of transformation in the social structure, especially the rise of a new economic elite and a new middle class; and the centralization and bureaucratization of the political institutions” (p. 191).

Because this book is translated into English, it is hard to know how the credit for the prose style should be divided between the author and the translator, but considerable credit is due. Difficult issues of historical and theological detail are made readily accessible to the lay reader. I know of no better brief account of either case, and, as well as drawing on the standard secondary literature, the author has interesting new data on the social composition of U.S. fundamentalism.

Especially in the first and last chapters, complex sociological issues are handled with masterful parsimony. As an example, here is Riesebrodt’s summary of the Berger view of secularization: “Modern development is taken to have, above all, three problematic consequences for religion: the disintegration of the supernatural view of life by modern science; cultural pluralism in the sense of the contiguous existence of various subcultures, particularly in large, modern cities; and structural pluralism in that life is divided into private and public spheres, whereby religion becomes a private matter” (pp. 22–23). This passage is brief because it is well written, not because it has little to say.

In every respect this work is exemplary. Taken on their own, the accounts of U.S. and Iranian fundamentalism are excellent introductions to those phenomena. Taken as illustrations of radicalized traditionalism, they contribute greatly to our understanding of the cultural and political effects of social change, and, with their careful dissection of the salient features of ideology, carriers, circumstances, and strategies of mobilization, they give us a model that allows us analytical purchase on the burgeoning but unsystematic literature on fundamentalism. Taken as a whole, the book is a model of theoretically informed but empirically rooted comparative sociology.

*God’s Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster.*  
By Donald Harman Akenson. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press,  
1992. Pp. x + 404. \$29.95.

José Casanova  
*New School for Social Research*

*God’s Peoples* shows convincingly that a cultural, social, and legal code, the Hebrew covenantal structure, which goes back to the middle Bronze Age, has not only lasted until the present but has actually served as the blueprint for structuring the recent histories of three contemporary societies: South Africa, Israel, and Ulster. Besides offering a masterful narrative—buttressed by copious secondary sources—of the analogous

histories of Ulster and South Africa since the 17th century and of the state of Israel in the 20th century, Donald Akenson's book attempts to show that "unless one uses the lens of the ancient Hebrew covenant as a primary mode (not sole but primary) of viewing the Ulster-Scots, the Afrikaners, and the Israelis, . . . neither their history nor their future will make sense" (p. 6).

The attempt is not fully successful. The book shows that "the ancient Hebrew covenantal grid"—made up of a jealous and bloodthirsty henotheistic war god, a chosen people, the conquest and colonization of a foreign but god-promised land, and the dehumanization, expropriation, subjugation, and segregation of the native population—functions as a great cultural code that has served to pattern the worldviews, experiences, and actual practices of three contemporary societies. As a work in comparative history, however, Akenson's book has larger theoretical and methodological claims than simply offering compelling and illuminating interpretations of particular histories. Challenging what he views as dominant social-scientific explanations, Akenson wants to show that culture not only matters but can be the determining independent variable. Here, however, Akenson overstretches his claims. Significantly, he fails to stress something that should be obvious from the histories he has so brilliantly reconstructed. The primary and fundamental fact in all three cases was the conquest and colonization of land. The covenantal code was derivative. It was developed later to legitimate the primary fact. Once adopted, however, it served to structure and to sacralize aberrant practices. This primary fact helps to explain the divergent cultural developments of Dutch Reformed Calvinism in Holland and South Africa and of Scottish Presbyterianism in Scotland and Ulster.

Similarly, his indiscriminating rejection of theories of modernization as an analytical framework that fails to explain the trajectories of the three societies depicted in the book rings hollow. It is ironic that, after having spent so much energy trying to prove the resilience of the archaic covenantal code in confronting modern trends, the book ends anticlimactically by depicting how since 1969 the covenant of Ulster Protestantism has come apart and the Afrikaners' system of apartheid has become unhinged. Even more ironic is the fact that when forced to explain such an unexpected turn of events Akenson resorts, at least implicitly, to two central tenets of modernization theory, namely, to the power of moral universalism to undermine invidious particularistic ethics and to the need of legality to ground its legitimacy in democratic, universalistic principles of justice. Having emphasized the primacy of the Old Testament moral code in the demotic theology of the Afrikaners and Ulster-Scots, Akenson shows how the covenantal code was undermined from within when the leadership of the Protestant churches became "liberal" by adopting a moral outlook more consonant with the New Testament code. Apartheid, which was first justified by the Bible, was now incompatible with Christian ethics.

Akenson also claims that meticulous legalism is one of the fundamental characteristics that modern covenant societies have inherited from the Hebrew scriptures. The three stories actually show that as often as not might makes right, that might has the power to make the law, and that the law has the power to justify might. Yet even purely casuistic legalism may hold the seeds of its own destruction. Akenson recognizes that “the ideal of justice is the one concept that can most effectively undercut the rule of laws” (p. 273), and he argues that the Ulster “civil rights” movement of the 1960s proved ultimately fatal to the covenantal outlook by convincing the outside world that the law in Northern Ireland was corrupt. The Afrikaners also proved unable to maintain their self-confidence in being God’s people. Ultimately, the Afrikaner elites became convinced that apartheid had become economically irrational, geopolitically aberrant, and morally unjustifiable. It would not be incongruous to read Akenson’s stories as empirical confirmation of the strength of global trends of modernization.

Without offering any explanation for the striking divergence, the book shows, however, that while the covenantal grid was unraveling in South Africa and Northern Ireland, in Israel following the 1967 Six Day War it was being established with ever-increasing and predictable rigidity. If the thesis is correct, Israeli society and the Jewish state are headed compulsively on a collision course with the modern world. It remains to be seen whether fidelity to the particularistic covenant will prove superior to the global constraints of capitalist rationality, geopolitical pressures, and moral and legal universalism. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether the books of Moses or the books of the prophets will gain the upper hand in defining modern Judaism.

The book concludes with a highly implausible prediction. “Modern-day Israel is only the most recent society to conform to the covenantal blueprint, but it will not be the last. Others will follow, for the covenant, as found in the books of Moses, is particularly suited to the sorts of smaller societies that are inevitably produced as great empires come apart and as small ethnic groups become independent of their former masters” (p. 357). Fortunately, the conquest and colonization of foreign land by people steeped in the culture of the Pentateuch is unlikely to be repeated.

*The New Politics of Class: Social Movements and Cultural Dynamics in Advanced Societies.* By Klaus Eder. London: Sage, 1993. Pp. ix + 223.

Hanspeter Kriesi  
*University of Geneva*

This book is a collection of essays by Klaus Eder about social class, social movements, and the relationship between the two. Most of these essays have been published before, but many were in German or French. They