



The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800

By David A. Bell

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In a work of lucid prose and striking originality, Bell offers the first comprehensive survey of patriotism and national sentiment in early modern France, and shows how the dialectical relationship between nationalism and religion left a complex legacy that still resonates in debates over French national identity today.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Bell (history, Johns Hopkins Univ.; *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France*) delineates the history of nationalism in France, tracing its origins to the 17th century. He shows how in 18th-century France, political and intellectual leaders made perfect national unity a priority, allowing the construction of the nation to take precedence over other political tasks. The goal was to provide all French people with the same language, laws, customs, and values. Bell argues that while the French leaders hoped that patriotism and national sentiment would replace religion as the binding force, it was actually religion that was a major (but not exclusive) factor in helping the French see the world around them. This period of history was the beginning of the first large-scale nationalist program. Bell also shows how the relationship between nationalism and religion contributes to the French national identity debate today. Bell's comprehensive and well-documented book is written in an accessible style and offers access to a web site with more detailed bibliography and appendixes. Recommended for French and European history collections. Mary Salony, West Virginia Northern Community Coll., Wheeling

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Review

A notable addition to the expanding literature on nationalism in general and of French nationalism in particular, *The Cult of the Nation in France* explores how national affiliation became part of individual identity. It demonstrates the connections between nationalism and religion, without falling into the simple trap of treating nationalism as another religion. Against the present-day challenges faced by French republican nationalism, Bell insightfully examines the paradoxical process whereby the French came to posit themselves as a union of politically and spiritually like-minded citizens. (Joan B. Landes, Pennsylvania State University)

A formidably intelligent and beautifully written analysis of how the French came to perceive their nation as a political construction. Its breadth, together with its highly original discussion of the role of religion, makes *The Cult of the Nation in France* essential reading both for students of nationalism and for anyone wanting to understand current French debates on culture, ethnicity, and identity. (Linda Colley, London School of Economics and Political Science)

David Bell is one of the most talented young historians working in any field. This fascinating, brilliantly argued, and beautifully written study demonstrates the multi-stranded origins of the concept of the nation in France. Bell's major contribution is to place the timing of this crucial evolution well before the Revolution of 1789. He never loses sight of the linguistic and cultural complexity of France, bringing to a conclusion the story of French nationalism in our era. (John Merriman, Yale University)

Bell delineates the history of nationalism in France, tracing its origins to the 17th century. He shows how in 18th-century France, political and intellectual leaders made perfect national unity a priority, allowing the construction of the nation to take precedence over other political tasks. The goal was to provide all French people with the same language, laws, customs, and values. Bell argues that while the French leaders hoped that patriotism and national sentiment would replace religion as the binding force, it was actually religion that was a major (but not exclusive) factor in helping the French see the world around them. This period of history was the beginning of the first large-scale nationalist program. Bell also shows how the relationship between nationalism and religion contributes to the French national identity debate today. Bell's

comprehensive and well-documented book is written in an accessible style...Recommended for French and European history collections. (Mary Salony *Library Journal* 2001-09-01)

At the center of Bell's subtle and intricate argument is religion. Religion, he suggests, was changing in the 18th century. And with men less likely to see God as an interventionist presence in their daily lives and more likely to stress God's distant, inscrutable quality, space was opened up for an autonomous realm of human action, described by a series of interconnected words: society, public opinion, civilization, fatherland and nation. (Richard Vinen *New York Times Book Review* 2001-11-04)

David Bell has interesting things to say about the French kindred and about an important aspect of their life together. *The Cult of the Nation in France* is about the way a particular kind of togetherness and a novel kind of identity were implanted, grew (and may have begun to wither) in France's fertile soil. The nation, he argues, is no spontaneous growth but a political artifact: not organic like a tree but constructed like a city. (Eugen Weber *Los Angeles Times* 2001-11-25)

Bell argues in his excellent analysis of the 18th-century conceptual birth of French nationalism that nationalism emerged at a point when French intellectuals increasingly came to see God as distant from human affairs and sought to separate religious passions from political life...A masterful, thought-provoking [study]. (P. G. Wallace *Choice* 2002-10-01)

This excellent book is at once a valuable account of the development of the concept of the nation in France and an important example of the use that can be made of the culture of print...Bell argues that right-wing nationalism has belonged consistently to a minority and that there has been a basic continuity in French republican nationalism over the past two centuries, views that not all will share, but arguments that testify to the importance of this well-crafted work. (Jeremy Black *History* 2002-10-01)

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