Politics and Religion, **13** (2020), 424–441
© Religion and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association, 2020
1755-0483/20

Book Reviews

City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What is Right. By Michael Bell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 360pp. $35.00 cloth, $24.95 paper.

doi:10.1017/S1755048320000048

Lucas Johnston
Wake Forest University

Michael Bell characterizes the "main motivation" for writing *City of the Good* as "recognizing [that] the historical and sociological context of monological traditions of truth can help us overcome these absolutist tendencies in our conversations with each other" (269). As an antidote to absolutisms, what Bell advocates is "that we not live in a city of the good, absolute and final, separate and solved, but, rather, that we seek each other and the ever-changing worthiness of lives lived in the everywhere" (273). Bell hopes that by recognizing the historical circumstances that buttressed absolutist thinking it may be possible to treat them as products of particular cultural contexts rather than as natural realities. Our social contexts and our lives are messy, characterized by dynamism and mystery, and reconceptualizing encounters with social, ethnic, and ethical "others" with more fluid and open-ended metaphors can foster understanding and peaceful interactions.

To set up his argument Bell must explore the cultural loam from which the preoccupation with absolutism grew, positing its source as an "ancient triangle" comprised nature, faith, and community (7). During the Neolithic period human populations grew, and the mode of production shifted toward more sedentary strategies prompting an era of increasing urbanization. He invokes the notion of the Axial Age, a moniker used to refer to the emergence of many of the so-called world religions between the first millennium BCE and the first millennium CE (10). The emergence

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of these religious systems (from Zoroastrianism, to the Dharmic Religions, Abrahamic traditions, and regional religions such as Confucianism and Daoism) is characterized as a shift from what Bell terms "pagan" religions to "bourgeois" ones. Bourgeois religions gave rise to a different sort of "natural conscience" grounded in increasingly urban social concerns. These distinctions are somewhat reminiscent of Emile Durkheim's division of social groups into those that exhibit mechanical solidarity versus those which are characterized by organic solidarity, but the categories pagan and bourgeois also carry implications about the politics of these societies.

The first main section of the book, "The Pagan," describes religious systems that either pre-dated the Axial Age, or which retain some of the trappings of pagan systems from which they were born. These are societies in which humans, other-than-human nature, and the divine are intimately entwined, where the divine (however imagined) is immanent and operates through the world: "what the gods are doing is what ecology does, [and] what ecology does is what the gods are doing" (44). Bell's point is that such a world is inherently political. The divine is not beyond nature, they are entangled, and not always beneficent. In contrast, in the bourgeois religions, concomitant with emergent sedentary modes of production, the increasing dominance of urban dwellers in the use and distribution of resources, and associated concretization of social hierarchies, imagine the divine to be something separate from both humans and nature.

Tracking this shift is the preoccupation of Part 2, "The Bourgeois." Here he addresses the emergence of Christianity, Buddhism, Gnosticism, Islam, and Hinduism, at pains to demonstrate that these religious systems, because they traffic in absolutist notions of the divine, are apolitical. Although Bell refers to these as "electrum faiths" (chapter 7), because they are alloys, combinations of different cultural movements and proclivities, his treatment still exercises theological concepts that imagine some essence inheres to each of them. For instance, Bell argues that the gospels all portray Jesus as apolitical and supernatural. Even if Jesus was not political in the way many ancient Jews imagined—that is, he was not a powerful political or military leader—his message had decidedly political implications. Even if, as Bell seems to do, one takes accounts of Jesus's miracles at face value, Jews during this time did not perceive a hard division between the natural and the supernatural in the way Bell implies (Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God,* 2014). Similarly, it is difficult to imagine the ancient Vedic caste system, or Muhammad's conquest of the Arabian peninsula as "apolitical" (191, 206). Bell's idea of nonpolitical politics is meant to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suggest that among traditions in which the divine was imagined as separate from both nature and humanity, ideas about absolutes were cast as "natural," enforcing social mores that were previously policed by kinship-based relations. The political, then, is masked by absolute concepts that supposedly exist outside the human (and natural) realm, but which in essence still enforce a different sort of natural conscience.

The last part of the book, "The Good," offers an argument that some religious traditions have been able to avoid, or at least temper their notions of the absolute by preserving some sense of mystery, by imagining that all grand explanations which make such supernatural appeals are necessarily incomplete and tentative. Recognizing the "awesome coolness" of a dynamic and unfolding world can help to break apart the rigid distinctions that accompany absolutistic thinking. Deploying the metaphor of the Jewel Net of Indra, a Buddhist notion, Bell suggests that imagining a world characterized by multiple and multivariate "truths" can act as a sort of salve for politically fraught social negotiations. Bell (and other sociologists, i.e., Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution,* 2011) traffic in concepts that many religious studies scholars or anthropologists have jettisoned, such as the Axial Age. It is, as the scholar of religions Russell McCutcheon noted, a construct rooted in a theology of religious pluralism rather than academic investigation of historical phenomena (*Manufacturing Religion*, 1997: 105, 123).

Although Bell notes that there is wild variation in these religious cultures, there remains a faint waft of essentialism in his treatment of these so-called world religions. Even so, the prose itself is lively and engaging, and Bell's work frames long-standing conversations regarding the character of religious societies using new terminology. Certainly his end game, to promote a more "civilized" public discourse related to a natural conscience informed by religious proclivities, is admirable and worth the ink.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000048 Published online by Cambridge University Press