
Book Review

Michael M. Bell, *City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What Is Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 340 pp., \$35 (hbk), ISBN: 9781400887934.

The last two decades have seen an explosion of scholars providing rationales for why and how societies conceive of 'nature' as they do. These rationales frequently seek to account for the role religions play in influencing ideas of what 'nature' and the 'natural' really are. In *City of the Good: Nature, Religion, and the Ancient Search for What Is Right*, Michael Bell provides a distinctively *sociological* perspective on common assumptions about nature, as well as how those assumptions came to be. His argument is: an understanding of the historical spread of city life, associated with the rise of state societies, helps explain the 'how' and 'why' of the ways we think about nature today. The rise of the world's major religious traditions, Bell claims, occurred primarily because of the moral concerns generated by the rise of bourgeois life. As a result, these religions have little to say about matters of ecology and environmental sustainability, which are traditionally more pagan concerns.

Bell sees the conflict between pagan and bourgeois cultures as a principal driver of ideological change in human–nature relations. He organizes the sections of his book around his understanding of this conflict. By 'pagan', Bell does not mean a sort of delusional or retrograde detraction from the main world religions, but a concern over the troubles of kinship disloyalty and the agricultural vicissitudes of pre-modern country life. Pagan cultures, according to Bell, possessed an 'entangled' worldview, one wherein nature, supernature (that is, God or gods), and the human were all twisted together. Nature was no separate matter but instead was combined with concerns over the ways of the supernatural (typically conceived of as an imminent force) and the ways of people. The pagan worldview, then, Bell says, did not abide a 'triangle' in nature–human–divine relations, but emphasized their entwinement. Bell develops this idea (what he refers to as 'nature before nature', p. 21) with reference to Greek and Roman myths, indigenous lifeways, and ethnographic research into contemporary societies which still venerate humans' knotted connection to the land and the divine.

The pagan worldview yielded, however, when kinship-based societies gave way to societies dominated by the social relations of class. With society's progressive urbanization beginning in the Iron Age and the attendant emergence of class consciousness, new moral concerns materialized. Hence the second section of Bell's book is devoted to illustrating how bourgeois society came to partition nature and the divine from the human in the development of what have become the world's most popularly observed religions. Religions like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, and novel iterations of

Hinduism, Judaism, and Daoism, appeared to meet the increasingly pressing needs of bourgeois life. Bell argues that bourgeois religion speaks little to concrete pagan concerns for ecological sustenance. In its place it offers abstract sustenance by faith, focusing on things like wealth inequality and universal moral truth. 'Jesus basically never discusses farming', after all, Bell says (p. 114). He talked about the prospects of upending unjust bourgeois social arrangements with class-defying love.

This is not to say Bell seeks a return to a lost pagan cultural past. Rather, he seeks a 'pagan-bourgeois synergy'. This will require remaining open to life's changes and uncertainty (like pagan cultures of old) while maintaining bourgeois ideals like the necessity of cross-cultural dialogue and political inclusion. What this looks like in practice is the 'deepening [of] religion's shades of green' (p. 270), he says—a new embrace of religion's entangled pagan roots, which should guard against the bourgeois penchant for seeking escape from life's instability in moral absolutes.

Bell's book is full of colloquialities and personal stories of his travel and research, and it is mostly jargon-free (case in point: Chapter 9 is entitled 'Awesome Coolness'). What it gains in readability, however, it can at times lose in precision. Bell's sociological analysis of the cultural transition from kinship-based pagan societies to the class-based sensibilities of bourgeois life provides a fresh and exciting account of religion's less-than-green evolution in modernity. Yet Bell is sometimes unclear when it comes to the more philosophically technical turns of his argument. For instance, I found his use of the word 'politics' to be diffuse. Bell argues that the modern idea of nature arose from the bourgeois desire to flee from finite, entangled contingency to find shelter in a realm 'beyond politics'—that of one-sided moral absolutes. 'Nature', as such, came to be seen as separate from the sphere of humans' universalist ideals. This may well be true, and Bell makes a good case for it. But is not humanity's alleged historical move to get beyond politics itself a *political* act? Social theorists have long examined the political implications of religions' transcendental concerns and commitments, showing how the assumption that maleness, straightness, and whiteness have a privileged access to *a priori* reason results in sexist, homophobic, and racist politics. Bell, I think, would agree with such accounts, but without a clearer idea of precisely what he means by politics, his criticisms of the various downsides of bourgeois religiosity do not fully land.

Points of imprecision are not entirely surprising in such an ambitious project as Bell's. What this book sometimes lacks in philosophical exactitude Bell makes up for in the sheer number of scholarly perspectives he assembles in support of his argument. His book sheds a great deal of light on the sociological bases of just what it is we are thinking about when we think of nature and our relationship to it.

Russell C. Powell
Boston College
russell.powell@bc.edu