Book Review


‘Despite its importance in the contemporary government of the United Kingdom’, Professor Bonney begins the third chapter of his work, ‘the monarchy does not seem to attract the attention from political scientists that it merits’ (p. 37). Unfortunately, those looking for an objective look at just how the monarchy serves an important role in the contemporary government of the United Kingdom will be disappointed by Bonney’s effort. For those looking for an opinionated argument as to why the monarchy’s current customs and rituals should be overhauled, Bonney’s book will satisfy.

In Chapters 1, 5 and 6, Bonney lays out a theoretical argument for how elites may use ceremony to demonstrate and maintain their power and preferences over the masses. Specifically, Bonney asserts that despite a growing secularisation in the United Kingdom, political and media elites can and do use events such as the coronation to retain the privileged status of religion—Christianity in particular and Anglicanism to be even more specific—in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth as a whole. Utilising the work of Steven Lukes, Bonney asserts that ritual can serve as a reflection of the power of elites in society. While there is much to agree with in these theories of ritual and power, Bonney’s work would have benefited from clarifying some of the implications of these assertions. Is it Bonney’s argument that media and political elites share the same religious values? Or that these very distinct groups—media elites and opinion-makers, the traditional aristocratic class and partisan political elites—all benefit from the Church of England’s special status in the monarchy and the United Kingdom? Can we really view ‘elites’ as a monolithic entity holding the same values and preferences? If it is the case in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth that elites of all varieties benefit from the trappings of power afforded the Church of England, Bonney should have clarified how and why this is so.

Chapter 2 is the chapter that most lends itself to a broad audience. Students of history, religion and comparative politics will all find value in this section of Bonney’s book. This chapter provides a highly accessible history and overview of the institution of the monarchy in the United Kingdom. Bonney also details the contentious history of the coronation and accession oaths that must be taken by the monarch, including the amending of the oath to drop overtly anti-Catholic language and the obligation to ensure the Presbyterian Church’s supremacy in Scotland. It is also in this chapter that Bonney introduces an argument that he asserts repeatedly throughout the book. Bonney believes that the coronation and accession oaths last used by Queen Elizabeth II are woefully out of touch with modern times. Specifically, Bonney calls for a process whereby the Parliament would be intimately involved and a secular coronation ceremony devised for the next monarch.
The third chapter of Bonney’s work also blends accessible, objective scholarship with Bonney’s calls for reform. In describing the rites and rituals that occur after the death of a monarch, but prior to the formal coronation of the new monarch, Bonney does commendable work. The aim of this chapter is not simply to inform the reader as to the accession oaths for the new monarch, which can occur months prior to their coronation, but also to help Bonney make the case that these procedures and oaths have been changed over time. Bonney points out the scrambling that has often occurred after the death of a monarch, and notes that not all new monarchs were particularly pleased to take the oaths as they existed; they were merely forced to do so as time was of the essence. As a result of their malleable nature, Bonney believes that there is no good reason that the oaths should not be revisited well prior to the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Bonney hopes that Parliament can debate matters including the title of ‘Defender of the Faith’ and the oath to maintain the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In keeping with the overarching theme of the book, it is apparent that Bonney hopes the religiosity of both the accession oaths and the coronation ceremony can be eviscerated.

Bonney makes note of the changing religious demographics in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, and uses this information to support his call for changing the current rituals. In Chapter 5 he discusses how the Parliaments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have grappled with the religious differences in their respective regions and subsequently devised three distinct ways of incorporating faith—or lack thereof—in their civil societies. Chapter 7 notes the religious diversity of Australia and Canada. In highlighting the increased religious diversity in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth nations, Bonney argues that there must be a modification of the traditional, Anglican-centered means of installing the monarch. But Bonney is dismissive of the idea of interfaith religious cooperation, calling it a ‘rickety structure’ and asserting that the intellectual and theological compromises asked of each party involved in such a venture will render it unworkable. Bonney goes so far as to claim that multifaith cooperation within the United Kingdom ‘bears some similarity to the Hitler/Stalin pact…’ (p. 137) in that it involves longstanding enemies and rivals putting aside their differences for the protection of their ‘perceived common interests’. This stands in contrast to ‘Humanist and secular values’ which provide, in Bonney’s estimation, ‘a superior common universe of discourse for… fundamental values…’ (p. 169). Bonney therefore argues not for a multifaith ceremony, but rather for a wholly secular coronation.

Given this argument, Bonney’s work raises the question: just how much do citizens of the UK and Commonwealth know about the installation process of the monarch, and how much do they want to see these ceremonies and obligations changed? It would have been welcome to see survey data relevant to these and other questions raised by this work. Nevertheless, students and scholars interested in the New Atheist movement will likely find Bonney’s work useful and admirable. Had the rest of Bonney’s book more resembled some of the objective scholarship presented in Chapters 2 and 3 in particular, it would be easier to recommend this book to students and academics in a wider variety of fields.

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