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## Book Review

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Joseph D. Witt, *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia: Faith and the Fight against Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), xi + 284 pp., \$60 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0813168-12-8.

This is an excellent volume in the series 'Place Matters: New Directions in Appalachian Studies'. Joseph D. Witt describes the conflicts over mountaintop removal strip mining in Appalachia, fleshing out the details of the various religious and secular activist groups that oppose the practice in *Religion and Resistance in Appalachia*. Witt's work is a thoughtful, thorough comparative analysis of the religious perspectives on religion, environmentalism, mining, and mountaintop removal through interviews with residents, religious leaders, activists, and miners. Witt argues that localized concepts of space interconnect with regional religious attitudes and practices to produce groups that collaborate despite significant differences in worldview. His argument rests on the role place plays in relation to religion on the ethics of dissent and the willingness to engage in resistance in Appalachia.

Witt specifically addresses southern Appalachia—Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee. Throughout the book Witt emphasizes the importance of landscape in the consideration of religion and nature in this particular region, though his work has further application beyond this case study. He affirms the importance of community-based direct action in the work of all the groups and organizations he considers. He also goes far beyond official statements of existing religious and activist organizations to reveal a 'detailed practice of the multiple contested values and narratives that contribute to early twenty-first-century mountaintop removal resistance, a pivotal campaign in the reemergence of direct action-based environmentalism...' (p. 8). Central to the entire volume is the question of what Witt calls 'hybridized' religious perspectives formed through activists with varying non-religious and religious ideologies, theologies, and commitments coming together to reimagine a post-mountaintop removal Appalachia. These perspectives are forged in the points of friction between individuals and groups who collaborate in various direct actions in the region, changing the religious landscape of Appalachia.

Witt's work is interdisciplinary, engaging Appalachian studies and religious studies, specifically dealing with religion and nature. His first goal is 'to describe the understudied role of religion in resistance to mountaintop removal' (p. 41). This is the foundation of his larger project of developing a model for 'rethinking the entanglement of religion, culture and place' in environmental movements beyond Appalachia (p. 41). He uses religious studies scholars from across the field—historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Robert Orsi and Bron Taylor stand out, yet Witt's work keeps its clear focus on lived religion in Appalachia and gives the emphasis to his

data over theory. He is open to both religious and non-religious facets of approaches to anti-mountaintop removal activism, and the voices of his subjects ring through bright and clear. His approach to the hybridized cultural accommodations that occur within such divergent groups—groups sharing a goal without sharing underlying religious, ethical, scientific, or spiritual suppositions—offers new insights for the possibilities of other comparative studies of religious communities engaged in direct action and activism.

Three rich veins run through this book. The comparative chapters on Catholic and mainline Protestants, evangelical Protestants, and what Witt identifies as ‘bio-centric and nature-venerating’ worldviews and direct-action activists highlight the similarities and differences between three long-standing activist groups in Appalachia. Chapter 2 follows the long history of Catholic and mainline Protestant approaches to the question of poverty and religion in the Appalachian region, though he does not linger on history, but rather offers an insightful exploration of the diversity of this group of liberal Protestants, such as Quakers and progressive Catholics, who are anti-mountaintop removal in the name of social and eco-justice. Many of these activists came to Appalachia specifically to serve the poor and engage in environmental activism. There are points of disagreement and tension within this broad coalition and Witt gives voice to both their tensions and commonalities.

Chapter 3 follows what Witt calls ‘theocentric’ activism, distinctly different from the social justice emphasis of the liberal Christian groups. ‘Theocentrism refers to God-centered ethics’ that focus on the will of God over any inherent value to nature or relevance of human concerns (p. 98). Sometimes known as ‘stewardship ethics’, this religious worldview is an evangelical theology and countermovement to the equally evangelical anti-environmental movement of dominionists who are present in Appalachia as well (p. 100). This chapter is nuanced as Witt explores the tensions within evangelicalism in relation to the environment, poverty, humanity, sin, and the Bible. Unlike the social-justice coalition in Chapter 2, many of these theocentric activists did not come to Appalachia to serve, but rather developed their perspectives on mountaintop removal after encounters with the practice and the region. This chapter is one of the strongest contributions of this excellent volume, delineating fine distinctions between individuals and groups, showcasing religious complexity and the taut ethical lines along which these activists live in Appalachia.

Chapter 4 enters new and important territory for Appalachian studies, expanding it with the work of religious studies scholars on Nature Religion at the forefront of the conversation. Here Witt further develops Bron Taylor’s concept of Dark Green Religion and shows the Appalachian activists he studies in this chapter embracing belief in the sacrality of the natural world at the heart of their activism. Witt connects with this natural ‘spirituality’, a term he acknowledges is problematic, but also persuasively argues that it best describes the expressions of this form of religious resistance with its ‘strong sense of kinship with the rest of the natural world...a feeling of the inherent worth of nature, and a longing to bring about a future society marked by increased cooperation and equality among beings and decreased exploitation of nature’ (p. 161). Witt’s work in this chapter carefully brings activists, their art, the landscape, and the highly personal nature of ‘spirituality’ into sharp focus, honing our understanding of the ways that religion informs life, values, and in these cases, resistance.

Witt's final chapter and conclusion are timely. While his research was too early to take into account disputes about coal mining and 'clean' coal from the 2016 Presidential election, there are still insights about that confrontation to be gleaned from this volume. Chapter 5 addresses conflicts over values, religion, science, and economics in what Witt identifies as cultural encounters between stakeholders in the resistance to mountaintop removal. Issues of authenticity, of who is 'local' and who is an 'outsider', are at the forefront of this chapter. The activism creates a community of people 'walking together separately' to end the practice of mountaintop removal, who learn and grow through their interactions with each other (p. 211). Witt is clear that not all activists are religious and that the activists and groups disagree about many issues: the future of coal, the role of the government in business and personal life, and the question of religion and its role in the movement. Witt connects the way activists think about place and religion, how the 'encounter with a major issue like mountaintop removal, religion, environmentalism, and place come together influencing individuals to take action and work together to bring about change' (p. 221). Despite their differences, these activists have in common a desire to preserve the natural world in Appalachia. I share his hope that his work here among these activists might teach us how to 'forge strong, just, and resilient communities' to face the challenges that the future will bring us (p. 221).

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