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## Book Review

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Lucas F. Johnston, *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), x + 273 pp., \$44.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-90804-982-7.

Within and beyond scholarship of 'religion and ecology' and similar fields, 'religion and sustainability' is a significant growth area for research and teaching. It contributes, when done well, not only to the study of religions but also to a larger inter- and multi-disciplinary field of Environmental and Sustainability Studies, with nested enclaves in Ecological or Environmental Humanities. Lucas Johnston is a fine example of excellence both as a researcher and as a communicator in these complex arenas. His monograph, *Religion and Sustainability*, presents timely, lasting, and important arguments and perspectives, and draws on diverse forms of research. It makes skillful and admirable use of data arising from fieldwork and interviews. It engages with critical literature to push debates much further. Fusing more ethnographic and more archival or 'study' modes of research enhances the final result: a book that has deservedly received a warm welcome. Because Johnston confronts disciplinary challenges evenhandedly and does not engage in apologetics for a particular 'pet cause', we can have considerable confidence in his conclusions and projections of future trends both within academia and in wider religious, political, and environmental contexts. *Religion and Sustainability* is at once inviting and accessible whilst boldly challenging contentions that deserve contestation. In particular, it challenges work that would delegitimize both religiously motivated activism and scholarship about religion.

A brief but useful 'introduction and reader's guide' (pp. 1-5) captures attention with a powerful vignette full of promise for improved understanding of controversies, diversity, and variable senses of urgency. These five pages clearly demonstrate what the book title's 'social movements' and 'politics' are about. The real drama here is not in imagining cozy clubs of romantic light-green environmentalists or religious proclamations of the greenness of this or that scripture. Johnston expertly steers us away from such familiar territory, towards the more edgy and conflicted world in which 'oil companies, international political bodies, the Sierra Club, radical environmentalist and indigenous organizations (and everything in between)' brand their own (and not other's) 'agendas, goals, and activities' as exemplary of 'sustainability' (p. 3). This is the world in which religious communities and individuals enact and discuss their notions of religion and sustainability. It is not an easy world and this book does not take the easy option of simply dismissing the greenwash of multinational oil companies or the (possible) light-greenness of those I have lampooned (deliberately anticipating this rebuttal) as cozy club members. Responsive to those among whom he

conducted research, Johnston demonstrates an 'ethic of personal risk' or humility but braids this into sharp clarity about his hope, 'for posterity's sake', that 'we are up to the challenge of rethinking sustainability' (p. 5).

After this, the book is divided into three parts where real and complex work is undertaken. Part 1 sets out approaches to defining religion and sustainability and why they matter. This does not only say 'I take religion to mean x' or 'I will use sustainability to mean y'. Three valuable chapters explore debates about these terms and propose some strategic employments. We discover a richer, more profound sense of why all this matters to those involved in these powerful contests. We are, as you'd expect, introduced to multi-disciplinary theorists who aid analysis and reflection. This would be good reading for those students starting out on 'sustainability' courses while rewarding established researchers delving more deeply into these necessarily inter-disciplinary arenas.

In Part 2, three further chapters explore 'the emergence and development of sustainability' (pp. 41-103). These expertly survey the birth and spread of sustainability rhetoric and practices, and provide invaluable discussion of the ways in which religious groups and individuals engage with civil society and the political world. The opening of the third chapter in this section (Chapter 6 of the book) illustrates the power of Johnston's writing. Beginning with the sentence 'The detonation of the first atomic weapons manifested in a simulacrum of a life form: a tall, straight mushroom' (p. 78), Johnston employs this somewhat shocking image to initiate a chapter entitled more prosaically: 'The contributions of natural and social sciences to the religious dimensions of sustainability' (p. 78). The point has everything to do with relationality and the entanglement of scholarly self-perceptions, affinities, ambitions, and imaginations. Without giving away the whole story, I am envious of the author's ability to bring so many fields of research together in a cogent and provocative discussion.

While it may be more usual for ethnographic data and case studies to precede evaluation, analysis, and even context, in *Religion and Sustainability* these form the third Part of the book. In fact, the data and cases are not presented raw—of course, they never are, because there is no such thing as 'mere description'. In the four chapters of this section, we are provided with carefully examined and thought-provoking discussions of 'evangelical creation care' (p. 107), 'interfaith efforts toward sustainability' (p. 133), and 'the religious dimensions of secular sustainability' (p. 160) before facing the question of whether common ground is manufactured or cultivated. I warmly encourage you to engage with this book.

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