

Lucas F. Johnston. *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment*. Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013. 224 pgs. \$29.95.

What is sustainability? How can religious ideas and language be engaged for promoting sustainability? Given the popularity of the word *sustainability* in common environmental dialogues and the growing religious tinge of many ecological discussions, these questions are significant. In his recent book, *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment*, Lucas F. Johnston seeks to define and describe the history of the concept of sustainability and to demonstrate how religious organizations have positively impacted sustainability movements, in pursuit of an answer for these two key questions. Johnston brings an interdisciplinary background to his writing, having studied theology and ecology. He currently teaches in the Department of Religion of Wake Forest University as an Assistant Professor of Religion and Environment and has previously published volumes on the relationship between science and religion and sustainability movements in higher education.

After the introduction, the book is divided into three parts. Part I lays the groundwork for the entire volume by giving Johnston's definitions of the terms "religion" and "sustainability." For Johnston, religion implies both the institutionally arranged societies of common spiritual practice as well as the garden variety spirituality that resists the identifiable boundaries of a group (p. 23). Sustainability is defined as "the strategy of cultural adaption to the dynamic interplay between ecological and social systems," which demonstrates what users of the term "believe is required to live meaningfully over the long term" (p. 17). From the very first section of this book, Johnston begins to demonstrate an intimate connection between deeply rooted beliefs, many of which are spiritual, and sustainability.

Part II expounds the history of the sustainability movement. Johnston notes that references to the limits of human habitat can be found in early the ancient Greek philosophers, but that the Romantic movement of Western thought is the first real evidence of concern for the concepts of nature and wilderness. The use of the term sustainability, however, has become much more popular in the decades since World War II. Religion, particularly Christianity, began to engage in discussions of sustainability its religious significance in the latter half of the 20th century. The religious aspects of sustainability have been, according to Johnston, largely shaped by information from natural and social sciences. The sciences have pointed the faithful toward appreciation of the variegated forms of life, a love of living things, and even a love for the cosmos. These emotional responses have since resulted in integration of sustainability concepts in religious communities and ethical norms that require sustainability. Johnston hails these developments as positive.

In Part III, Johnston moves into analysis of ethnographic data from a wide variety of interviews of people from different points along the spectrum of religious identification. The common thread among each of the groups discussed was an emphasis on sustainability and sustainable development as primary ethical concerns. Johnston leads this section off with a discussion of the relationship between Evangelicals and broader sustainability efforts. Johnston sees the growing concern of evangelical Christians about creation care as a positive, though he notes that a pattern of separation among evangelical Christians tends to keep them distinct from other faiths, but there is an “ongoing construction of a set of positive myths that reframe the evangelical identity in terms of ecological and social justice” (p. 132). At the same time, there has been an explosion of interfaith movements focused on increasing the interconnections between sustainability and religion. Johnston notes that the interfaith approach has pitfalls, as it often tends toward syncretism and can result in a change in previously held religious convictions. However, he argues the risks of a loss of identity are worth the potential synergistic benefits for the environment. Next Johnston discusses the religious overtones of many of the secular sustainability approaches. Johnston is referring to the process of myth creation among secular environmentalists, with stories, ethical norms, and distinct community structures based on the sustainability meta-narrative. The book concludes with Johnston’s argument for the use and growth of religious language “to promote a more empathetic engagement with cultural, ethnic, and ethical others for the purpose of reducing suffering and increasing quality of life” (p. 203).

Johnston’s discussion of the growing relationship between sustainability and religion is an important contribution to the conversation on religious environmental ethics. While many other books and articles have been written to encourage a connection between religion and sustainability, *Religion and Sustainability* provides analysis of how that connection is taking place. Johnston accomplishes his two goals in this book. His unique approach to the subject helps provide a clear and accurate description of the growth of sustainability movements as well as the impact that religion, broadly defined, has had in increasing interest in sustainability. The descriptive accuracy of this book is a significant strength.

However, *Religion and Sustainability* is not without weakness. Johnston’s broad definitions are essential to his methodology, but such breadth also creates an inability to make certain significant distinctions, particularly among different religions. For example, Johnston addresses the evangelical Christian contributions to sustainability but he never clearly defines what “evangelical” means, which results in some cited examples of individuals and churches that may be more historically than doctrinally evangelical. While cooperation toward common goals among organizations with different charters (both religious and secular) is often praiseworthy, Johnston does not give sufficient credence to the deep doctrinal divide between the movements. Those distinctions often necessitate separation between organizations despite similar goals, a fact

that Johnston glosses over. Similarly, Johnston casts the growing religious overtones of the secular sustainability movement in a positive light, failing to note that such a movement toward a deep green spirituality among environmentalists is a reason for rejection among faith communities that are deeply rooted in distinctive doctrines. Johnston sees such religious language as a positive that should unite religiously engaged people across faith communities when the possibility for divisiveness seems nearly as significant as the potential for unification.

This book is unique among texts in the field of environmental ethics. As a descriptive overview of the marriage between religion and sustainability the book has no peer; based on that contribution alone *Religion and Sustainability* is worth reading.

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