

BOOK REVIEWS

Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment

LUCAS F. JOHNSTON
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Many may be surprised by the juxtaposition of religion and sustainability in the title of this book. However, since the late 1980s, basic and applied research has increasingly attended to the relationship between religion and ecology, including the relevance of religion for sustainability as well as for the related arenas of environmentalism and conservation (e.g., Dudley, et al., eds., 2005, and Vershuuren, et al., eds. 2010).

An overview of this book is best expressed in Johnston's own words in the final chapter: "In places where sustainability provides convincing identity markers for people who use the term to reflect particular visions of where society is headed and what values it ought to maximize, it is fulfilling the function of explicitly religious narratives--- a basic companion to human culture" (p. 198). For example, he discusses the religious ideas, metaphors, and imagery that leaders of sustainability initiatives use in their narratives.

The primary goal and achievement of this book is to reveal the relatively little-recognized, let alone appreciated, connections between religion and sustainability through a historical review of the

pertinent literature and, more importantly, the results of field research. The latter encompassed dozens of informal interviews and 25 formal interviews with leaders of major organizations focused on sustainability. The results of Johnston's interviews are discussed in Chapters 7-9 which focus, respectively, on Evangelical Creation Care, interfaith approaches like the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, and the Faith-based Outreach Program of Conservation International, among other cases. These religious, interfaith, and "secular" cases of sustainability initiatives at the local grass-roots and international levels, plus much more, are well-contextualized, including points regarding the broader arena of what may be called religion and ecology, religion and nature, or spiritual ecology. Importantly, Johnston reveals that: "Even ostensibly secular international organizations utilize the religious dimensions of sustainability (in the form of spiritualized language, religious metaphors, or discourses of awe and reverence) for their own, often different ends" (p. 55).

The presentation of the results of these interviews in "Part III: The Ethnographic Data and Sustainability Data" is skillfully set up by "Part I: Defining Religion and Sustainability, and Why it Matters," and "Part II: The Emergence and Development of Sustainability." Johnston's rigorous analysis of sustainability recognizes the diverse and sometimes conflicting ways in which the concept is applied by energy companies, international political institutions, environment organizations, radical environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and others. Johnston himself applies this working definition: "Sustainability is a strategy of cultural adaptation to the limitations imposed by the dynamic interplay of ecological and social systems, couched in large-scale stories that illustrate how to persist within habitats in a manner that provides genuine affective fulfillment now, and for the foreseeable future" (p. 25). Although this definition is rather involved, it serves as a heuristic device to help Johnston reveal many of the religious and religious-like elements in sustainability discourse that may generate emotive responses and promote core beliefs and values in the audience.

Throughout the book Johnston repeatedly asserts that sustainability serves as a political religion to the degree that its underlying core values function as a vehicle for connecting affective or emotionally evocative states with political issues regarding resource use. He broadly conceives religion as simply deep beliefs and core values. At the same time, Johnston affirms that he is not defending the value of religion or suggesting that it is the most important element in the pursuit of a sustainable society. Yet, he also asserts that sustainability cannot be fully understood without considering its religious dimension.

The greatest contribution of this book is that it convincingly demonstrates the role of religion as an important, albeit usually subtle, component in sustainability. Johnston asserts that: "... the key motivation for participating in the quest for a better, more sustainable world was often religious...the emergence of sustainability and the resurgence of religion may be viewed as complementary trends" (p. 70). This "religious metanarrative of sustainability" is repeatedly considered in various ways throughout the book, such as in the Earth Charter which recognizes kinship among all human and nonhuman beings as part of the basis for a universal environmental ethic.

It is appropriate to caution that sustainability alone is insufficient for promoting greener societies. For example, chimpanzees, dolphins, and even humans are among the animals that conceivably could be harvested sustainably. However, there are most compelling moral arguments against such harvesting, even if it could be sustainable ecologically and economically. Much of the moral concern derives from religion, or even just from independent personal spiritual experiences of awe, mystery, power, interconnectedness, and reverence in nature as Johnston repeatedly notes.

Chapters 4-6 offer a convenient in-depth review of historical developments associated with the concept of sustainability, although this reader craved some mention of important pioneers such as George Perkins Marsh and Anna Botsford Comstock in addition to Johnston's brief discussion of the great

debate over the Hetch Hetchy dam between wilderness preservationist John Muir and wise-use conservationist Gifford Pinchot. Much to the author's credit, however, this book is not limited to a historical literature review of the development of concerns for sustainability. Chapters 7-9 are based on the collection of original data through interviews with leaders of important sustainability initiatives. This adds useful new information on very successful NGOs like the Interfaith Power and Light program focused on energy conservation, initiated by Reverend Sally Bingham from San Francisco, and on the Alliance of Religions and Conservation focused on sacred places and biodiversity throughout the world, launched and directed by Martin Palmer from England.

The broad and flexible definitions of religion and sustainability may be criticized by some, but they very usefully serve to expose the interconnections between religion and sustainability that previously have gone largely unrecognized and unappreciated. At the same time, occasionally applying religious labels to describe aspects of sustainability, like calling NGO leaders "traveling evangelists," may weaken Johnston's argument for the mutual relevance of religion and sustainability for some readers.

This book is grounded in qualitative research, apparently without the benefit of any extensive quantification of survey data. Johnston's field research is mostly limited to the leaders of key sustainability organizations, rather than the usual ethnographic practice of community based data collection. It would have been useful to follow the interviews with leaders by observations and interviews with the involved communities, an approach more typical of ethnographic practice. While Johnston did participate and observe sustainability advocates and activists for nearly a decade, it does not appear that this involved any regular ethnographic research. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that no study or book can do everything, and what this book does is exceedingly well-done; namely, detailing the history of the development of the concept of sustainability and revealing the religious and quasi-religious aspects involved.

Some readers may also consider another weakness to be that only a few ethnographic cases of sustainable societies are mentioned and that these are drawn mostly from the Amazon rather than a broader cross-cultural sample. Also, some concepts are insufficiently explained, such as “cosmophilic affinities” and “deep relationality.” Even deep ecology should have been discussed more for readers unfamiliar with it. Perhaps the author assumes too much background for all potential readers. A glossary would have helped as well, especially for students.

Johnston’s basic thesis and approach reflect the influence of his principal professor at the University of Florida, Bron Taylor and his book *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. But others have made a similar argument, such as Roger S. Gottlieb in his book *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future*, and Leslie E. Sponsel in *Spiritual Ecology: A Quiet Revolution*. These three books and the present one by Johnston are all complementary, albeit each with a somewhat different focus although there is also some overlapping in approaches and contents. Johnston excels in documenting on the basis of field research as well as the literature his particular focus on sustainability. One other source that is especially relevant to his book is Worldwatch Institute researcher Gary Gardner’s book *Inspiring Progress: Religions’ Contributions to Sustainable Development*, although only Gardner’s earlier brief paper is cited by Johnston. For a far broader cultural evolutionary perspective on sustainability, it would have been useful to discuss John W. Bennett’s ideas about the ecological transition in his book *The Ecological Transition: Cultural Anthropology and Human Adaptation*, although this seminal work is even neglected by many in ecological and environmental anthropology, inexplicably and unjustifiably.

Johnston’s book conveniently provides an unusually sophisticated, substantial, penetrating, and insightful study of the relationships between religion and sustainability. For instance, he describes how religious groups and leaders as well as spiritual language and metaphors have been deployed in promoting

normative aspects of sustainability concerns at the Rio Summit, in the Earth Charter, and elsewhere. Incidentally, Johnston is strategically positioned to contribute further to this subject in the future as he holds a joint appointment between Religion and Environmental Studies at Wake Forest University, and he concludes his book with some suggestions for future research.

This carefully crafted book includes a Reader’s Guide after the Introduction, a page or two foreshadowing each of the three parts, detailed endnotes, and an extensive multidisciplinary bibliography, the latter in itself worth the purchase of the book. Individuals with no particular interest in religion or spirituality will still find this book quite relevant, even if they are only interested in sustainability or the broader subjects of environmentalism and conservation. It can help others to think through the concept of sustainability and related matters more systematically, deeply, and critically.

Use of the reasonably priced paperback edition of this book as a required course text would generate an informative discussion in advanced undergraduate and especially graduate seminars, not only in ecological and environmental anthropology, but in a wide range of courses from environmental studies to religious environmentalism, given its multidisciplinary approach and contents.

Like some other recent books, this one will be a revelation for any open-minded reader who still thinks that religion and spirituality are unrelated to sustainability, ecology, conservation, and environmentalism. The profound shift in consciousness that is necessary for the revolutionary transformation from the ecocidal industrial growth society to one that is life-sustaining and enhancing, which David Korten (2006) and Joanna Macy (2012) among others recognize as “The Great Turning,” has yet to penetrate most of science and academia, as well as society.

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