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Lyn Thomas, ed., *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost?* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 200 pp.

The future of so many of Earth's species, including our own, hinges on whether or not we learn to consume sustainably. Religion will play a substantial role in determining this. Perhaps religion will get in the way of saving the planet, perhaps it will pitch in to help save it; most likely something of both. *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability*, a collection of essays edited by Lyn Thomas, addresses such questions: What is the relationship between religion and consumerism? What bearing does religion have on consumption? What impact does consumer culture have on religion? What are the implications for the environment?

It is a commonplace that Eastern religions teach people to live in harmony with the planet while Western religions give them license to trash it. Even though there are understandable historical reasons for this way of thinking, such reductive generalizations are unhelpful. We cannot define religions monolithically, as "for" or "against" sustainability. Instead we have to consider religions in light of the different ways they are practiced in different times and places. By taking such an approach, the essays in *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* complicate common assumptions about religion, consumption, and the environment. The results provide us with a fuller understanding of the roles that religion will play in the future of life on this planet. This should prove useful for those who want to understand the world and those who want to change it.

Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability is a multidisciplinary collection. It includes work from anthropology, geography, sociology, public policy, religious studies, cultural studies, and sustainability studies. There is a balance between theoretical and empirical studies, with qualitative methods predominating. The collection deals with multiple religions without attempting to be comprehensive. While Christianity and Islam receive the most attention, there is also discussion about Judaism, Hinduism, secular spirituality, and religion in general. Similarly, the collection is international though not quite global. Great Britain is the primary locale, with studies that deal with Anglo and immigrant cultures. Other countries dealt with at length include Iran, Israel, and Slovakia.

A major theme in the *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* is the idea that religion can work against consumerism. In her introduction to the volume, Thomas asks whether religions can serve as "countercultural resources in the struggle to create new and less damaging conceptions of 'the good life'" (5). In her chapter on spirituality, she answers her question by arguing that religious and secular spiritualities can indeed offer

insights, values, and practices that lead to more sustainable “ways of living” (87). To a similar effect, Nicholas Buxton points out that Benedictine monastic values such as “sacrifice, asceticism, and commitment” are “profoundly countercultural” in relation to the individualism and consumerism of mainstream society (38). Likewise Paul Cloke, Clive Barnett, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass describe how religious values motivate Christians in the “fair trade” movement to consume differently (101) and how churches provide them with networks for information and resources that enable them to act (103). Other essays in the collection document elements within Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (strongly conservative elements at that) preaching and mobilizing against consumerism. Zuzana Búriková writes about Roman Catholics who view “consumerism as the contemporary manifestation of evil in the world” (142). Ultra-Orthodox Jewish and Fundamentalist Muslim leaders who preach similar things are examined in studies by Omir Shamir and Guy Ben-Porat (175) and by Hossein Godazgar (117). The most common assertion in *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* is probably that religion can contribute to ethical and sustainable consumption.

But if religion works against consumerism in some cases, it outright supports it in others. Búriková’ presents a particularly dramatic example of this. The Slovakian Roman Catholics in her study understood building large homes and filling them with nice things as an essential part of their religious obligation to their families. Búriková cites one priest preaching that the “many new and beautiful houses” that had been recently built in the village “were an expression of the believers’ real hearts and spirituality” (147).

Just as commonly, it is consumerism that holds sway over religion, rather than the other way around. Several studies in *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* show consumerism shaping, co-opting, and even replacing religion. When consumerism shapes religion, it makes it more accommodating to consumption. Hossein Godazgar describes how attitudes about consumption in Iran have evolved in recent decades. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Godazgar explains, the religious leaders of Iran have been strictly against consumerism. The supreme leader has declared “over-consumption” to be categorically “against Islam” (131). However, with the rise of illegal satellite television in the country, many people have become more tolerant of certain forms of consumption and over-consumption. For instance, early on the religious prohibition against music “left no doubt for religious people that it must be avoided” (125). However, today listening to music is “no longer a sign of ‘irreligiosity’” (even while it remains illegal in many cases) (125). Other forms of consumption have similarly become more widely practiced and accepted, including films, clothes and make up, eating out, and the celebration of Valentine’s Day.

More aggressively, sometimes consumerism simply co-opts religion. This can happen wholesale, such as with “the health and wealth gospel of televangelism” (48). But most of the time it happens at a smaller scale, such as with religious merchandizing, where religious artifacts and symbols are appropriated by the market and reduced to commodities. Sharmina Mawani and Anjoom Mukadam offer the sale of “rosaries and crosses,” “statues of Buddha,” and “religious symbols . . . plastered on everyday objects”

(60) as well as religious brands of soft drinks (64) as examples of “religion . . . being manipulated for profit” (67).

In the most dramatic cases, consumerism can replace religion altogether. In quite practical terms Thomas describes how the “noise and pollution” and “speed and perpetual motion” that the drive to consume engender are not “conducive to quietness, stillness and spirituality” (81). The material conditions of consumer society can push religion or at least the spiritual aspects of religion out of the way. Moreover, as Tim Jackson and Miriam Pepper argue, sometimes consumerism fills a void that forms when people reject religion. Consumerism performs important social functions that used to be performed by religion, offering identity, a way of making sense of the world, and even, ironically enough, a sense of justice (22). Unfortunately, consumption does not do these things very well and cannot do them indefinitely. But Jackson and Pepper suggest that if we understand these functions, rather than simply condemning consumerism, then we may be able “to devise (or recover) some . . . more sustainable alternative” (33).

Consumerism and religion can relate to each other in multiple ways simultaneously and even contradictorily. Nicholas Buxton’s study of a BBC2 reality show about monasticism makes an interesting example of this. On one level, Buxton argues, the program *The Monastery* promotes religious values that are at odds with consumerism. On another level, the program also turns religion into something to be consumed, allowing viewers to appreciate a way of life that subverts consumerism without having to limit their own consumption in any way whatsoever. Buxton argues that both of these levels ought to be taken seriously (52).

The essays in *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* show a range of ways that religion and consumerism can relate to each other. Several of them also point out that sometimes religion and consumerism merely exist alongside each other. For instance, Godazgar reports that his “informants do not usually associate their consumer practice with Islam” (133). People of all faiths are influenced by factors other than religion (133). But since most religions attempt to speak to the whole of life and since consuming is central to living, it is significant to note that there are cases where religion and consumption do not overtly interact. This reveals something about the character of religion as well as consumption, adding another layer to the complexity of their relationship and their role in the future of the planet.

Most of the contributors to *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* connect their work to environmental concerns. Some focus directly on sustainability, while others bring it up mainly in discussing the implications of their research. Oddly, one or two studies do not discuss the environment, perhaps assuming it as a backdrop. Nonetheless, all of the writers in the volume seem to share the understanding that how we consume will determine the future of the planet. Significantly, this is not the case for those whom they study. By and large, the environment does not come across as a significant consideration in the beliefs and practices of the people and communities described in this volume. We would, of course, expect people who habitually over-consume to disregard the environment. But even many of those who believe in and practice ethical

and sustainable consumption seem to do so with little thought for the planet. They are more often motivated by other things, such as the quality of their individual spiritual lives, concern for the poor, ethical treatment for workers, financial responsibility, and cultural integrity. This suggests that there remains much work to do in connecting religion with the environment and connecting consumption with sustainability in the minds of people across the world.

Those who want to understand the world and make a difference in it will have to come to terms with both consumerism and religion. Those aspects of religious belief and practice that underwrite unsustainable and unethical consumption must be subverted and resisted while those aspects that promote sustainability and care for the Earth must be encouraged and supported. *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability* makes a substantial contribution to this work.