"The Denial of a Diminished Planet: The Challenge to Science and to Religion"
Larry L. Rasmussen
Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics,
Union Theological Seminary, NYC

On May 1st, the Religion and Environmental Studies departments welcomed Larry L. Rasmussen to campus to give the 2012 Ian G. Barbour lecture.

Rasmussen’s background and topic were particularly related to the Barbour lecture series, which honors a founding member of the department whose internationally acclaimed work has brought religion and science into fruitful conversation. Rasmussen is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. He is a graduate of St. Olaf College and serves on Olaf’s Board of Regents. Rasmussen is among the first major Christian Ethicists to turn his attention to environmental ethics. In books such as Earth Community, Earth Ethics; Moral Fragments and Moral Community; and Earth Habitat: Eco-Injustice and the Church’s Response, he has called Christian ethics to account on the environment. He has also served as a distinguished public scholar with the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran church, and other faith communities. Rasmussen’s talk in Carleton’s Great Hall, related to his forthcoming Oxford University Press book, Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key, and was entitled, "The Denial of a Diminished Planet: The Challenge to Science and to Religion."

Rasmussen argued that although there is growing recognition of the ecological crisis our planet faces, there is also denial of the fundamental causes that are creating this crisis. We must look to the underlying structures of society (the industrial paradigm, now global capitalism, and unprecedented human population) to seek alternative solutions, he said. And, religion, a discourse with a long-standing commitment to raising essential questions about how people live and interact, may prove to be a crucial part of understanding such alternatives. Rasmussen began his talk by asking his audience to keep in mind those who do not have a voice in discussions such as the Barbour lecture at Carleton – specifically three groups: poor people, the earth, and future generations. He brought a much-needed reality check to scholars at Carleton, challenging them to find a more open-minded and creative approach to the important questions of our age.
Why I Study Religion: An Occasional Series featuring a student voice

Why I Study Religion, Katie Powell ’13
All too often, when I tell people that I’m a religion major, they assume that what I actually meant is that I’m going to school to become a pastor. “no, no,” I explain to them, “Some people do that with their religion degrees, but that’s not really where I’m headed.” By this point in the conversation, I can visibly see the wheels turning in my counterpart’s head as they try to put together why on earth I would major in religion if not to become an ordained something... “Well then, what are you going to do with that degree?” they usually ask me. I give them my nicest smile, and with a twinkle in my eye, I say, “I guess we’ll see.”

The truth is, I didn’t choose to major in religion because I knew it would be an incredibly lucrative and employable title on my resume. Far from that, in fact. I chose it because I get an intense amount of personal satisfaction from the classes that the Carleton Religion Department offers. The classes I’ve taken are both interesting and challenging; they touch on the familiar, as well as push me to explore the unknown. At its core, Carleton’s religion major is about people, and the exploration of how people have reacted to and struggled with similar ideas in very different ways. And as I’ve continued to take classes that will study great philosophical thinkers and communities right up the road within the same week, I’ve begun to grapple, in my own right, with some of those same ideas.

And, although I probably won’t become a pastor, I know that whatever I choose to do with my religion degree I will have a better understanding of people, and the way that they work and have worked within the world, as well as a better understanding of myself, and the way that I am able to work within the world.

Professor Noah Salomon Witnesses the Birth of South Sudan

In July of 2011, Prof. Noah Salomon attended the declaration of independence ceremonies for what is now the world’s youngest nation: South Sudan. Prof. Salomon was in South Sudan on a research project studying how the nascent state is managing the religious diversity it inherited as well as how Muslim communities (which, on July 9, were transformed from national majority to minority literally overnight and without traveling anywhere) were faring under the new political arrangements they had entered.

Prof. Salomon’s research took him to the national capital of Juba, in which he undertook research with the Bureau of Religious Affairs in the Office of the Presidency as well as Muslim organizations headquartered there, and to the northern South Sudanese city of Malakal, a religiously heterogeneous locale in which he observed the struggles of Muslim individuals and organizations for integration into South Sudanese society and the local construction of an explicitly South Sudanese Muslim identity. Prof. Salomon’s research contributes to the study of the effects of the emergence of the modern state and its institutional apparatus on existing concepts of religious and moral personhood and is undertaken in a unique context in which he is able to observe in real-time the transition from the statelessness brought about by civil war to the statehood that emerged through independence. For more on Prof. Salomon’s research please see his recent blog post at:
Mollie Meiches '12: Professor Abu-Lughod's visit to Carleton encouraged me to critically engage and reflect on the intersections among religion, cultural relativism, normative ethical systems, and the West's salvation complex. Her work cogently illuminates many tensions that must be carefully addressed by a student in the humanities—tensions between, for example, cultural relativism and one's moral imperatives against particular forms of pernicious unconscionable violence. Abu-Lughod's work advocates self-reflexivity, considering one's positionality in relation to the 'other' as a vital tool for confronting these tensions in religious and anthropological inquiry. While I appreciate the value of her argument, I was left wanting for more. I respect Abu-Lughod's attempt to be neutral and humble; to not assert a personal ethical norm over and above the lived and very real experiences of her subjects of inquiry. However, Abu-Lughod's research ultimately left me more puzzled by the conundrums she addressed. For instance, how does one avoid adopting hegemonic or narrow conceptions of the 'good life,' but also productively intervene when people are subject to very real and problematic violence? Perhaps this sense of befuddlement is a necessary part of negotiating the fuzzy boundaries between culture, ethics, religion, and politics, but I question the utility of this self-reflexive ambiguity in situations of desperate social or religious inequity.

Chloe Zelkha '13: Lila Abu-Lughod illuminated the way in which feminist language has been co-opted by the US government in order to spark a Western savior impulse that ultimately justifies violence against Muslim nations. However, in her (very valid) attempt to complicate this narrative of "white men saving brown women from brown men" she seemed to dismiss and even mock stories of sexual violence as told by Muslim women (roundly condemning this genre as "pulp nonfiction"). Certainly, these stories should not be used to etherize Muslim men or to justify imperialism, but they deserve to be told, and mocking any instance of sexual assault is a grave error. In dismissing instances of oppression on the micro scale, she does women a great disservice.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Prof. of French, Columbia University: "What is African Philosophy? The Discussion of Orality and Islamic Thought in Francophone Africa"
2012 Seniors Comps Talks

Kate Dorwart - Bharat Mata ki Jai: M. F. Husain, Hindutva, and Modern India

Rachel Foran - Made and Making: The Formation of Somali Muslim Selves in Rural Minnesota

Claire Harper - Religion and Pain in the Ritualization of Birth

Peter Kerns - Voluntary Poverty: Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin’s Program for Social Revolution

Mollie Meiches - Renewing the Mikveh: Contesting the Jewish Female Body through Ritual Practice and Public Discourse

Jimmy Rothschild - Mount Moriah Revisited – In Search of a viable contemporary Jewish ethical reading of the Akedah

Graham Schneider - Go West, Young Buddha: Chögyam Trungpa, Skillful Means, and Spiritual Authority in Modern America


Jon Walsh - Maqamat Musiqi, Maqamat Tassawuf: An Analysis of the Role of Music in Sufi Mysticism