Rabbi Amy Eilberg and Professor Louis Newman were recently honored by the New Israel Fund at its 17th Annual Guardian of Democracy Dinner on Wednesday, September 21.

The New Israel Fund is an organization dedicated to the vision of a peaceful, pluralistic Israel. Through support of social justice initiatives and advocacy efforts, the NIF seeks equality and democracy for Israel. They honor Amy and Louis for their years of dedication to the cause and their work fostering cross-cultural dialogue between Jewish communities and the world. As the NIF has recognized, Amy and Louis are truly guardians of democracy.

Amy is the first woman rabbi ordained in the Conservative movement. She is co-founder of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a leader in Jewish hospice work and spiritual direction, and Amy is a bridge-builder—between Israelis and Palestinians, between Jews, Christians and Muslims, and among Jews across the ideological spectrum.

Her husband, Louis, is among the country’s leading scholars of Jewish ethics and a celebrated professor at Carleton College, where he has taught for nearly three decades. Louis has also been a devoted community leader, serving as president both of the community Day School and of his synagogue in Saint Paul, as well as being a longtime member of NIF’s International Council.
Why I Study Religion

Dana Wright ’95

I arrived in Northfield twenty years ago fairly certain about my academic interests. When asked about my intended major, I routinely said American history or sociology and anthropology. I must confess that religion was nowhere on my radar. Thankfully Carleton gives students ample time to explore their options before declaring majors. And early on I had the good fortune to take a class that made me reconsider my academic course. That winter I enrolled in a freshman seminar offered by the religion department entitled Faith, Ethics, and Fiction. It was the “fiction” that caught my eye, and that term I read some wonderful books connected by the thread of Christianity’s legacy in the Americas. But the class was and remains personally significant for a number of reasons.

First, it was taught by Professor Anne Patrick – the first of many exceptional instructors in the department who helped me develop into a critical thinker and a confident and (reasonably) persuasive writer. It was also a class – again the first of many – that challenged me to have opinions about complex issues, consider how my personal experiences and family history influenced my perceptions of the world, and learn how to participate in genuine dialogue with others. Finally, the seminar introduced religion as a fascinating, diverse, and interdisciplinary field of study; a field in which I could combine my academic and personal interests.

And so I was hooked. Ultimately I focused on American religious history and liberation theologies.

Studying religion expanded my frame of reference. It helped me think about the interconnectedness of history, literature, art and music, politics, and cultures in ways I had not considered before. More importantly, I learned the skill of discovering and making connections of my own. I never researched, read, discussed, wrote or enjoyed being a student more.

For more information, or to contribute to NumèNews, call or email Sandy Saari at (507) 222-4232, ssaari@carleton.edu

Why I Study Religion

Michael McNally ’85, Professor of Religion

I study religion because it never ceases to amaze me, and this for at least two reasons. First, religious traditions and institutions are consistently among the most socially conservative forms of human doing – the ultimate endorser of the status quo that can ground arbitrary distinctions of social power in the ostensibly way things really are. At the same time, religions can also be the sources of power that drive social revolutions. In American history, religion provided a biblical basis for slavery; it also became a useful medium through which resourceful African Americans criticized, resisted, and sustained hope and meaning within slavery’s confines. And a century later, of course, religion made possible the broad success of the civil rights movement.

Secondly, and very much related, religion never ceases to amaze me because inasmuch as religions, in historic and comparative perspective, are clearly made, not given, products of human imagination and built from the repertoire of bodily experience and social processes of which they become part and parcel, religious people do not only posit or project gods or ultimate reality; they experience them as more than the sum of the produced parts. This seems to make all the difference for religious people; as a consequence it makes all the difference for me.

If the social scientific and humanistic strands of the study of religion consistently meet in this terrain that neither can claim solely for itself, I should add that when push comes to shove, I throw my hat in with the humanistic possibilities of the study of religion, for most personally, I study (and teach) religion because it is elementally a way to take other people seriously, to endeavor to understand people of other traditions, and of other points of view within my own Christian tradition, with a rigorous, disciplined regard for understanding them on their own terms as best I can while making transparent and disciplined reference to my own social place and my own ultimate commitments. The study of religion involves neither labcoats nor safety glasses, its interpretive efforts find their fulcrum and legitimacy in the shifting worlds between traditions, between human communities. In this, there is a deep intellectual humility hard-wired into the professional study of religion. Speaking personally, the more I come to know about Ojibwe religion, the more I realize I do not know about Ojibwe religion. And it is this kind of intellectual humility combined with a passionate hunger to know, that the study of religion, along with the other interpretive humanities, has to offer a world that trades far too often in certainties.
The Life and Art of the Indigenous Warli People of India: A Demonstration and Conversation with artist Anil Chaitya Vangad of Ganjad Village, India. The indigenous Warli people of rural western India revere the land as the infinitely creative energy of nature. Their dynamic folk paintings—traditionally done in rice paste on the mud walls of their homes—use a richly textured pictorial language to celebrate the divine balance of a life lived in meaningful coexistence with the natural world.

To this day, Warli communities in the forested areas north of Mumbai continue to live according to the traditional practices and philosophies of their ancestors, struggling to strike a sustainable balance as forest-dwellers in a rapidly industrializing society. It is only in recent years that the mainstream art world in India has begun to take notice of their extraordinary folk paintings, bringing them out of their village-based ritual, domestic, and decorative contexts to a broader audience throughout India. The art and life of the Warlis remain virtually unknown in the United States.

Master artist Anil Chaitya Vangad spoke of his life in a traditional Warli family compound, the philosophy and cosmology that are unique to his community, and his paintings, which virtuosically celebrate the divine balance between humans and the natural world. This event provided a rare opportunity for Twin Cities audiences to encounter this extraordinary artist and hear about his traditional, sustainable way of life. He hails from the village of Ganjad in western India, the third generation in a family of Warli artists.

Why I Study Religion
Kate Dorwart ’12

I’m sure many Carleton students understand the protocol that is inevitably followed when meeting someone new outside of the immediate college community. There seems to be a prescribed sequence of questions: “Where do you go to school?” “What year are you?” Then, “What are you studying?”

When I respond that I study religion, I’m always intrigued by the other person’s response, because they seem thrown off balance. They’re forced to go off-script. Most people get confused. Some can’t seem to adapt. “Oh. Wait, which one? Just… All of them?” “That’s nice! Are you planning on being a priest? Wait, women can’t do that…” Or, my personal favorite—a blunt, straightforward, “Why?” Though it can be trying to have these conversations in the supermarket, at the gym, or with my distant relatives, it is important to me that people understand. I study religion because I’m interested in how people around the world live their lives and why. What makes life meaningful, and how do individuals and communities express and enact that meaning? How do people understand and relate to themselves, the world, and others?

Uncovering the answers to these questions requires looking at the multiple layers of belief and action, which calls upon us to tackle them from multiple angles. This brings up another reason why I study—and enjoy studying—religion: in my purview, the study of religion is profoundly and necessarily interdisciplinary. Religion saturates history, politics, art, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology. Studying religion allows me to free my curiosity from concerns about jurisdictional boundaries, and to follow my interests where they take me.

I suppose, in sum, that my answer to the woman in the grocery store checkout aisle is generally a bit weightier than she perhaps would have wanted or expected. But I think that, associated awkwardness aside, the process of struggling to understand me mirrors the larger study of religion. Understanding where other people are coming from can be difficult, but ultimately, the attempt is rewarding. We can come away with a greater understanding of what unites and separates us in belief and action, and how to communicate within and across boundaries, essentially exploring the diversity of ways in which one can be human.
Recently Published Faculty Books

Women, Conscience, and the Creative Process
By: Anne E. Patrick (2011)

Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah
By: Louis E. Newman (2010)

Honoring Elders: Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion
By: Michael McNally (2009)