



Winter 2013

Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key by Larry Rasmussen

Laura Stivers

Department of Religion and Philosophy, Dominican University of California, laura.stivers@dominican.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stivers, Laura, "Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key by Larry Rasmussen" (2013). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 32.

<http://scholar.dominican.edu/all-faculty/32>

DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/dial.12076/abstract>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

Rasmussen, Larry. *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 462 pages.

Larry Rasmussen's new book, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, like his last environmental ethics masterpiece *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (won the 1997 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion), is eloquently written and incorporates a multitude of interdisciplinary sources to argue for Creation justice. In both books Rasmussen calls for a paradigm shift and structural change. In *Earth-Honoring Faith*, however, Rasmussen draws on a number deep religious traditions to form a "comprehensive ethic of responsibility fitted to the demands of a new era, the Anthropocene" (363). While 95 percent of human history occurred before the Neolithic Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, Rasmussen points out that the changes in human/Earth relations have been altered drastically in a short span of time, primarily due to fossil fuels allowing humans to "bypass the rhythms and requirements of nature that preindustrial populations had of necessity to observe season after season" (53). Thus, we are now in what scientists call the "Anthropocene" era where the planet is dominated by human activities.

Rasmussen is prophetically calling for both a perspectival paradigm shift as well as radical structural change of our economies and communities to modes of thinking, acting, and living that embrace, not destroy, all life and its generative elements. He says humans must "learn to sing a new song in a strange land (Psalm 137:4)," but this time the land is the planet not Babylon. While he argues that forced behavioral changes might be necessary to challenge our anthropocentric "reigning life-narrative" and unsustainable lifestyles (he notes that not all humans live unsustainably), he believes that the world's deep faith traditions should also engage the heart and intellect of humans to adopt Earth-honoring cosmologies and practices voluntarily.

Earth-Honoring Faith is divided into two parts. The first section sets the stage for the importance of faith traditions in developing an ethic of responsibility, outlines the world we have and the faith we seek, and then offers foundations for the ethic we need. Rasmussen argues that science does not teach us what we most need to know about nature; that is, how to value it. Religion and culture do (111). To "see afresh" towards an Earth-honoring faith requires living by grace, experiencing life as a gift and a sacred trust, and connecting God *with* the universe, not viewing God separate from creation or simply in our own human image. The ethic we need includes a moral vision whereby the "entire community and each of its participants might, so far as possible, flourish" (155). This vision requires creation justice and the nurture of practices that prevent harm. For creation justice to occur, anticipatory communities of moral formation must emerge, communities that embody cultivation of the earth as vocation and that simultaneously attend to human well-being. In such communities, we find our "souls" when we are in touch with the "soil."

In the second part of the book Rasmussen develops five interreligious "disciplined ways" or "spirited lifeways that renew and recast human responsibility," namely asceticism, sacramentalism, mysticism, prophetic-liberative practices, and wisdom. Asceticism serves as a corrective practice or vision of repentance for excessive consumption, a choice to be truly centered in God not mammon. Rasmussen contrasts sacramentalism and its web of life metaphor to commodity ethics and its nature as resource worldview. Sacramentalism sees the universe as alive and whole, not as a storehouse of resources to be commodified and discarded. Mysticism addresses alienation in the

modern world and views the universe as a “communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (294). Rasmussen explores the prophetic-liberative way through the figures of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Gandhi, noting that power structures are always on the minds of prophets, and arguing that power analysis is crucial, not auxiliary, to ethical method. Wisdom traditions “sit in places” as they require “careful, patient observation of nature” for guiding human responsibility. Rasmussen shows that all of these typologies are found cross-culturally and in different faith traditions, and he believes they can offer the “substance and moral-spiritual energy for the birth and rebirth work of sustainable communities” (363).

Rasmussen emphasizes the importance of religion to human meaning and action, and sees the need for all faith traditions to reorient their anthropocentric focus and become Earth-honoring. In other words, he calls us to “shift from the human subject to nature comprehensively as the starting point and measure” (24). This book helps us to understand that our freedom, full humanity, and survival come by living sustainably within the universe’s web of life, not with the ability to use and abuse nature as we see fit.

Rasmussen is clear, however, that humans “practice self-deception as a fine art” (45). Humans with power are the most apt to convince themselves that they are “stewards” of nature without recognizing the moral claims the rest of nature has. The concept of “stewardship,” Rasmussen notes, has often been used to promote a master/slave ethic, not an Earth-honoring ethic. Rasmussen’s message that both human thought and action go hand-in-hand in relation to Earth-honoring faith is not unique, but his engagement of many of the world’s deep faith traditions to develop various disciplined lifeways or strategies of engagement for change is novel. He understands that the planet’s present ecological condition demands universal transition and change by humankind. Individuals will be drawn to different lifeways or strategies for Earth-honoring faith but all of the typologies will be important to the creation of sustainable communities where members are in touch with their souls through the soil.

Rasmussen agrees with the environmental justice (EJ) movement’s claim that social and environmental justice must be addressed simultaneously, and that any talk of human alienation from nature must include the “role of plain coercion in the transformations that have befallen lands, cultures, and people” and the denial and “amnesia” of white privilege (210). He notes, however, that there is what he calls a “Karl Marx/John Muir” tension within the EJ ranks that is at root unresolved anthropocentrism. Many in the EJ movement are concerned about equity but not biotic rights in their understanding of sustainable development. As Rasmussen puts it, “Muir has disappeared from this horizon.” Thus, Rasmussen makes a distinction between environmental justice and ecojustice. The former, he argues, is focused on human dignity in relation to power and societal structures and procedures; while the latter is about the dignity of creation and the cosmic connections that include humans and the rest of nature. Rasmussen prefers not to see the two as inherently contradictory, yet leans towards creation justice as he believes it encompasses ecojustice (219). I tend to agree with this view but worry that amnesia so often sets in and environmental racism gets ignored in the dominant environmental movement’s focus on creation justice. Thus, I would be careful of too easily dismissing the Marx/Muir tension despite problems of anthropocentrism within the environmental justice movement.

Rasmussen has a gift for writing poetically and eloquently along with in-depth scholarly treatment of numerous thinkers and ideas. While *Earth Community Earth Ethics* had short creatively written chapters that could be used individually for teaching purposes, the interconnected and longer chapters of this book do not lend to such use. I learned something new from every chapter but was a little lost in the trees until reviewing the entire structure and message after finishing the book. Despite this difficulty, I highly recommend *Earth-Honoring Faith* and am thinking of using it in an interdisciplinary graduate Humanities course I teach on environmental ethics. The length and depth of the book would keep me from using it at the undergraduate level or in church study groups, but it will greatly inform my thinking and teaching at these levels.

Dr. Laura Stivers
Associate Professor of Ethics
Director of Graduate Humanities
Dominican University of California