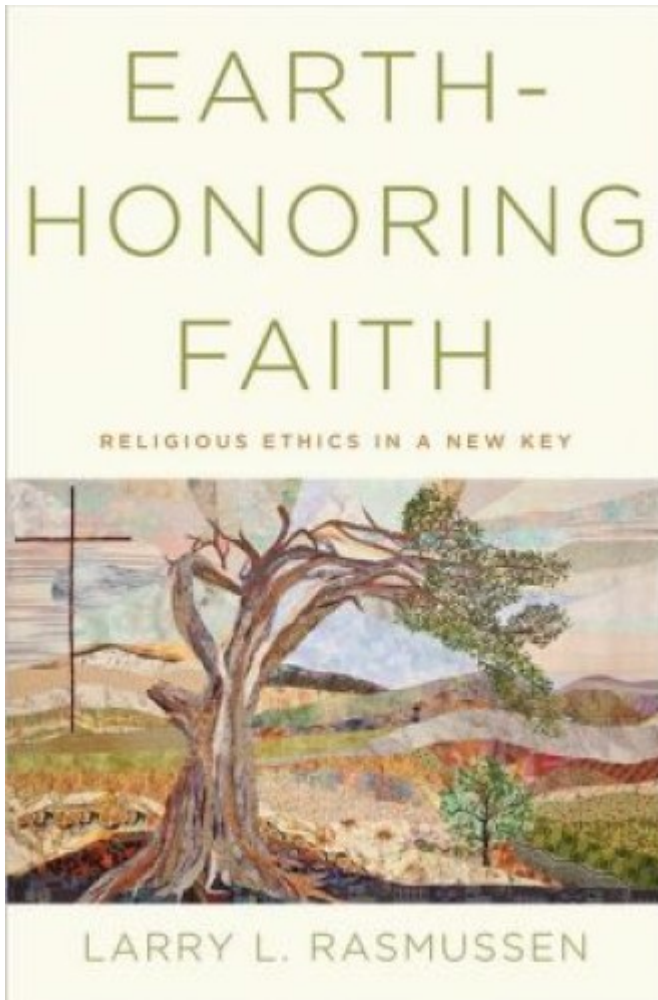


*Earth-Honoring Faith*, by Larry L. Rasmussen

reviewed by [Russell C. Powell](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

## In Review



### **Earth-Honoring Faith**

By Larry L. Rasmussen  
Oxford University Press

We live in a strange new world. Climate is rapidly changing, ecosystems are being destroyed, and species are disappearing at alarming rates. Given such a challenging outlook, what can be done to right humanity's course? How can we change our ways

so the planetary community can flourish?

Drawing insights from the ancient worldviews and moral traditions of the world's religions, Larry Rasmussen argues in *Earth-Honoring Faith* that the fate of all life on Earth depends upon our living "in a new key."

Rasmussen's ethical vision is not new. His project is not a beginning but a rebeginning, a reimagining of timeworn religious traditions that can transform human thinking. Professor emeritus of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Rasmussen contends that there is an organic alliance between spirituality and ecological responsibility, and that religious traditions like mysticism, asceticism, prophetic practice and the cultivation of wisdom offer healing counterresponses to the pervasive alienation of our

industrial-technological age. Rasmussen acknowledges that modern innovations are necessary for us to know what is happening to the planet and to create solutions that will repair some of the harms we humans have inflicted on Earth. But "few people will die for a pie chart," he writes. Spiritual conviction, rather than mere scientific knowledge, is what animates real and lasting social change.

We must tap the deep reserves of spiritual traditions to address the present environmental crisis because, according to Rasmussen, we are fundamentally religious creatures whose religious identities originate in our biosocial realities. Our connection to the wide web of creation is ineluctable; we are "born to belong"—to be in relationship with our planet and the vast community of life it supports. Given Earth's grandeur, Rasmussen says, it is no surprise that our religious sensibilities often begin with wonder at the splendor of the world.

Despite all this, Rasmussen contends, humanity has developed a pathological indifference to ecological consequences and has caused our planet to undergo fundamental structural change, which further demonstrates the inextricable connection between human life and the other-than-human world. As we approach and in some cases cross the thresholds of irreversible planetary destruction, Rasmussen calls us to join what Thomas Berry termed the "Great Work": a transition to ethics, politics and economies that are fundamentally sympathetic to all forms of life.

For this great work to begin, says Rasmussen, we must reevaluate our ethical perspectives. He elucidates a moral vision that endorses sustainable and

regenerative technologies and economies, encourages flourishing for all who participate in the community of creation and aims to restore heretofore alienated relationships between people and the land.

Rasmussen illustrates that through practices like asceticism, mysticism and prophetic vision, seemingly primitive religions and worldviews can be reimagined to inspire new forms of ecological discipleship. Ranging from Celtic Christianity to Gandhi, Simone Weil to Reinhold Niebuhr, the Earth Charter to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rasmussen draws on myriad thinkers and movements to exhibit creative ways that religious practice might capture and reshape our moral imagination.

Readers seeking programs particular to their own faith system may be disappointed at the lack of ethical specificity in *Earth-Honoring Faith*. The book engages a multitude of religious traditions, but it may not help specific religious communities to identify how their own faiths are Earth-honoring. Still, the book will encourage conversations that might give rise to new and innovative Earth-honoring practices.

In many ways *Earth-Honoring Faith* resembles an intricate, colorful song played by a vast collection of deft instrumentalists. Rasmussen is a master at tying together a large number of resources and perspectives, each carefully tuned to play the right notes. Persuasively, even lyrically, he has assembled a grand orchestra to inspire deep reflection and animate meaningful practice.