

Welcome Comments for Carl Ernst Public Lecture

March 8, 2011

Welcome to Lane Community College. I am Sonya Christian, Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs. We are excited to be kicking off a series of public lectures on Islam, with Carl Ernst presenting *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary Era*.

Religion is a subject that can be particularly delicate because it touches on the innermost values and convictions of each of us. It is a subject which demands that we bring our best selves to the discussion and require deep sensitivity to others. Conversations about religion require a focus on learning first because, although we may be steeped in our own religious beliefs, we are seldom intimately knowledgeable of other religions. It is through learning that we can begin to deeply understand and courageously engage in the conversations that will allow us to appreciate each other and the diverse religious and spiritual perspectives that thrive in our community, the nation and the world.

We believe that the academy is an ideal place to engage in learning and discourse about Religion and, here today, about Islam. Academia is the appropriate environment to discuss controversial and delicate issues, where deep intellectual engagement occurs, an environment free from fear that is dedicated fully to learning, to the expression of multiple perspectives, to a diversity of ideologies, allowing learners to stretch their thinking and wrestle with new or difficult ideas. It is only through such respectful consideration of divergent ideas that clarity and learning are achieved. By engaging in what the academy does best, the college and community at large will have a forum both to speak and be heard, to understand and be understood in an area where the ideas expressed can sometimes be challenging and demand the best of us.

Today, we are here to learn about Islam, the religion of 1.5 billion Muslim people worldwide representing about 22% of the world's population. As with most major religions, Islam has faced fragmentation. As we know, in the 20th century, movements have risen up to counter the influence of secular political ideologies in predominantly Muslim countries. Islam is an old religion that, like others, sometimes struggles with contemporary issues arising in an increasingly complex world.

As part of an effort to understand these issues, to learn and engage with the conversations on Islam and other world religions, Lane Community College has launched a 2-year initiative, lead by a collaborative group of faculty and staff.

This initiative has a variety of components and includes the *Visiting Scholars on Islam Lecture Series* of which Carl Ernst is the inaugural scholar. An excerpt from the prospectus for this lecture series developed by the core group reads:

Because of the current state of war between our country and certain people and groups that espouse an extreme and violent form of Islam, there is a strong tendency to reduce the actual complexity of Islam into a stereotypic and monolithic image that distorts factual reality, does a disservice to the multidimensional nature of Islam, and breeds further polarization and conflict.

The Visiting Scholars in Islam Program will bring to our campus scholarly experts on Islam who represent a diversity of backgrounds and offer a plurality of perspectives to the academic study of Islam. The Program will set the tone, provide information, facilitate learning, and engage us in dialogue as we explore and grapple with the complexity of this subject.

At this time I would like to recognize the leadership group who has diligently worked on this idea: Janet Anderson, Bob Baldwin, Susan Carkin, John DelNero, Dan Falk, Mark Harris, Veena Howard, Ken Murdoff, John Seidel, Jim Salt, Stan Taylor. A subset of the leadership team has put in countless hours in pulling together the program design and working through the details.

Please give a special recognition to the core team who has been leading this effort: Jeff Borrowdale, Religious Studies faculty; Rick Colby, Religious Studies faculty at UO and now also teaching part time at Lane; Nadia Raza, Sociology faculty; Cliff Trolin, Religious Studies faculty; and Ken Murdoff, Dean of Social Science. Lastly, a big thank you to Anna Kate Malliris in working on the logistics to make this event happen.

I also want to acknowledge the partnership with the UO Religious Studies Department and chair of the department Dan Falk.

Let me close with the words of William Stafford

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*
from "A Ritual to Read to Each Other"—William Stafford