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## Reflections on Edith Wyschogrod's Contributions to AAR

Edith Wyschogrod's involvement in the American Academy of Religion stretches back more than 40 years, including serving as president in 1993 and as JAAR associate editor from 1992–1994. In reflecting on her contributions to the AAR and the field of religious studies, former AAR presidents and staff paid tribute to her leadership, intellectual abilities, and character.

Catherine Albanese, whose presidency followed that of Wyschogrod, recalled “her cool, calm perceptiveness” and keen “attention to the details and dimensions of leadership.” Peter Paris, AAR president in 1995, noted her “careful thought, good judgment, and wise counsel.” Former AAR Associate Executive Director Warren Frisina spoke of how “openness and inclusion, two keys to Edith's own intellectual biography and scholarly success, could be seen in her appointments of speakers, journal editors, and committee chairs who represented a broad cross-section of the AAR's membership.” Former AAR president Ray Hart lauded her as “an esteemed and estimable contributor to the rejuvenation of the field of religious studies, particularly to the national leadership of AAR,” during the field's most formative decades of the past half century.

Wyschogrod's academic specializations included philosophy of religion, ethics, and European continental thought, to which she brought impressive capabilities. Frisina recalls her “penetrating intellect” and “ability to foster conversations across great intellectual as well as political distances.” Albanese noted her “ability to appreciate all sides of a question.” And Hart described her as “that scholar/teacher as excellent as rare, one whose knowledge was profoundly deep and wide.”

Many admired her character. Paris speaks of her “gracious spirit.” Frisina refers to her “compassionate soul.” Said Hart, “Her kind comes but infrequently, and the AAR is blessed beyond deserving that she came our way.”

## Mark C. Taylor Reflects on Edith's Life and Publishing Career

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Edith Wyschogrod, an influential philosopher of religion and [University of Chicago] Press author, died on July 16 at the age of 79. Over the years, the Press published two of her books, as well as an essay on value in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Her *Saints and Postmodernism* was a key book in our Religion and Postmodernism series.

Mark C. Taylor, a long-time Press author, was close friends with Wyschogrod for more than three decades. We asked him for his remembrance of this extraordinary woman, and he offered this thoughtful memorial.

*“To speak from the burial place is to inhabit a terrain that is not a terrain, an exteriority that is the non-place of ethics, the 'space' of authorization of historical narrative.”* — Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering*

Edith Wyschogrod now speaks to us from the burial place — speaks to us from the non-place of ethics she probed so thoughtfully, speaks to us of spirit and ashes, saints and terrorists, calculation and the incalculable, memory and forgetfulness. Memory and forgetting she taught us are never innocent but are ethical acts for which each individual must take responsibility. How to remember? How to forget?

I first met Edith over thirty years ago and for the following three decades we talked every other week. Our conversations ranged from the professional and political to the philosophical and personal. Edith was a person of enormous intelligence, insight, balance and, yes, wisdom. She returned to graduate school after raising a family and over the years rose to positions of considerable influence in the academy. After teaching at City College of New York, Edith moved to Rice University, where she became the J. Netown Razyor Professor of Philosophy and Religion. As her reputation grew, she gained national prominence as a member of American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the President of the American Academy of Religion. During the years when the culture wars were raging, Edith was often a voice of reason, who was able to persuade the most entrenched opponents to communicate and cooperate.

Though her interests were broad and diverse, consistent issues run through all of her writings. Edith was the first person to introduce the work of Emmanuel Levinas to an American audience.

In her 1974 book, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, she explored the themes of justice, alterity, gift, and ontology in a way that brought together post-Heideggerian continental philosophy with the Jewish tradition. A decade later these issues became the preoccupation of a generation of younger scholars in the study of religion. Her subsequent book, *Spirit in*

*Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger and Man-Made Mass Death*

(1985), extends her analysis to the relation of modern philosophy to the logic and ideology of twentieth-century death camps. As her interest in contemporary continental philosophy grew, Edith continued to probe ethical questions in unexpected ways. In

*Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*

(1990) and

*An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology and the Nameless Others*

(1998), she effectively refutes critics who insist postmodernism is blind to ethical questions and is irredeemably nihilistic. In her philosophical writings as in her personal life, Edith always sought to bring together those who deeply disagree. Throughout her entire career, she attempted to establish a civil dialogue between continental and analytic philosophers.

Edith's interests were not, however, limited to philosophy and theology. A life long student of dance and lover of art, she not only analyzed but also drew inspiration from some of the greatest modern artists. Edith steadfastly resisted the trend toward greater specialization and expanded, rather than narrowed, her research, teaching and writing. Her final book, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (2006), demonstrates how deeply she immersed herself in the natural sciences and questions related to technology. Though wary of many current developments, Edith's profound understanding of the horrors of the twentieth century did not dim her hope for the possibilities of the twenty-first century.

Books alone do not tell the story of a life. In her devotion to teaching and commitment to family and friends, Edith embodied her ethical commitments in everyday life. In her later years, Edith lectured and wrote about altruism. Having first become interested in this vexing issue in her study of the death camps, she became preoccupied with the logic and motivation of altruistic acts. I suspect she never fully realized the extent to which her investigation of altruism was, in fact, of her own life. Edith was always there when you called and you could trust her absolutely. There are very, very few people of whom I would make that claim.

Part of what made Edith Wyschogrod so special was her sense of proportion. She knew what counts and what doesn't count — and often her calculations were at odds with others. Edith understood what so few in the academic life do not: at the end of the day — and it is now the end of the day — it is more important to discuss baseball with your grandson than it is to discuss philosophy and theology with colleagues.

I am writing these words on a crystal clear August morning as the sun is rising on the beautiful Berkshire Mountains. Edith and I usually would talk early on Saturday mornings. Sometimes our conversations were about our work or the difficulties we were having with colleagues but more often we discussed the seemingly trivial matters that often turn out to be most important. I miss Edith and our long conversations; I still have not accepted that, though I may continue to call, she no longer can answer.