

religious studies

AAR EDITION NEWS

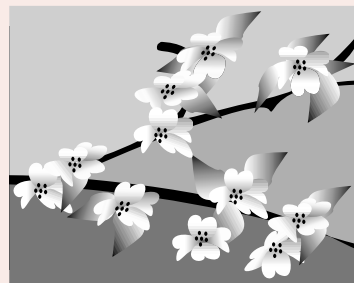
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In Memoriam

Willard G. Oxtoby 1933-2003

RSN invited several colleagues to offer reminiscences about Will Oxtoby who died on March 6, 2003 only a few weeks after being diagnosed with colon cancer.

Christopher Buck, Michigan State University, writes . . .

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation televised a documentary on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and showed film footage of Willard Oxtoby as a young postdoctoral fellow among the first team of American scholars sent to the Holy Land to help piece together the fragments. Shortly after his time abroad, Oxtoby heard a paper (R. Morton Smith, "II Isaiah and the Persians," *JOAS* 1963) that changed the course of his research from comparative Semitic languages to the comparative phenomenology of religions. From that point forward, Oxtoby was involved in a lifelong dialogue with other faiths, as exemplified in his book, *The Meaning of Other Faiths* — one of the classics in the theology of pluralism.

Oxtoby was my PhD supervisor, a role that stretched back to when he was Jonathan Z. Smith's surrogate PhD supervisor decades ago. Oxtoby would often tell his students that, had he his life to live over again, he would still choose "comparative religions." Often given to punning, Oxtoby had a mischievous arsenal of religious jokes. His irreverent charm was his charisma. Oxtoby was an almost saintly devil's advocate. He could pose a critical question by means of a joke. His love of the profession made a difference, as he engaged the interest of numerous undergraduates and helped launch the careers of more than a few of us in the profession. The editing and publication of Oxtoby's unpublished work would be the most befitting tribute to this consummate comparativist.

Alan F. Segal, Barnard College, writes . . .

The following are excerpts from the eulogy for Willard G. Oxtoby given by Alan F. Segal on March 12, 2003 in Toronto, Ontario.

WILL WAS MY TEACHER and colleague, mentor and director, editor and friend. We first met in 1970 at Yale. From there, the Oxtoby family were off for the adventure of Toronto, where he became the Director of the Centre for Religious Studies, which he founded and which remained the center of his academic interests ever since. He continued in that capacity and situated the Centre firmly within the life of the University.

Will was one of the nicest, kindest people I have ever met, a person of impeccable character and irrepressible good humor. He was a quick wit. You all know about his puns so I won't elaborate. Over the years, as he traveled the East Coast in a succession of aging Volvo station wagons, we would look forward to his arrivals, as he often used our home as a stop along the way, to our delight. He was, above all, one of the most exuberant scholars I have ever met, who researched everything, great and small, with the same optimistic good humor. Nothing escaped his eye. One morning about fifteen years ago, I

came downstairs to start breakfast for Will, who was our guest overnight, to find him already up and deeply involved in a conversation with my son Jordan, who was then about six. The subject was European chamber pots, which Will was describing in great detail. Will certainly knew his audience. Jordan was at the perfect age to appreciate the technology and artistry of this mundane object.

This exuberance extended to every subject. Ask Will anything, anything at all. Out came the file cards and pen, scribbling bibliography, route notations, points of interests, which came at you like a blizzard. Want to know how to drive from New York City to Toronto? Well, Will had at least thirty routes, twenty-five of which he had personally driven and would describe in detail, down to points of interests, the donut shops, and truck-stops. And he had plans for traveling the other five. He recommended the ones that were off the main highways and had the best views. He could tell you the time of year to take each route, the best direction for the views, and when you had to try for reservations at the well-



placed motels. When you arrived in Toronto, want to know how to get around? Will had the history of the TTC at his command, down to the age of the rolling stock for the St. Clair trolleys. He knew the best connections with buses. And he knew what were the best sights from each section of town and how to get there. He was a master at finding cheap, good, out of the way ethnic restaurants. Want to know the same for San Francisco, Banff, or Teheran, or Europe? Will had the same knowledge for all of them, all scribbled out for you on the same ubiquitous file-card pad or later e-mailed to your account.

The same skills were applicable to his study of world religions. His command of detail was amazing, all with specific knowledge of how it made religions fit together and helped to explain what religion was about. He was a comparativist of course. But he was not just a comparativist. He was a Bible scholar to start with. He was among the first generation of scholars to work on the Dead Sea Scrolls. His knowledge of religion soon expanded to Zoroastrianism and Iran, starting with the language and literature, going through a thorough bibliographical knowledge of the field, and ending with a new synthesis of the relation between the religions.

From there, Will set out to become familiar with most of the religions of the world.

Without exaggeration, he could have written every single chapter of his two-volume study of world religious traditions, East and West. And his knowledge extended not just to the major points philosophically but the literatures [usually in the original language], to the major rituals [which he had witnessed and could discuss], and the major sites [which he had inevitably visited and could describe with the appropriate humorous anecdote]. His transliterations and consistency were absolutely infallible. His sense of the crucial historical conceptualization for comparison was unflinching.

He and Julia [Ching] published a good deal together. After the shock and the grief of Julia's death a little over a year ago, Will began again at his scholarship alone. He was doing a one-volume version of his *World Religions* text. He had planned out a reader in the religions of the West from its beginnings through Islam. Its outline alone was a piece of genius. It was an enormous task and I don't know anyone else who could have done it so well. He also became the American Academy of Religion lecturer in Religion for this year,

“He told me about several humorous firsts in his career: (1) He became a Presbyterian minister without actually attending divinity school; (2) He gathered the inscriptional data for his dissertation in one day; (3) He learned how to smuggle pork sausage into Israel.”

coming up with an enormously creative and timely series of lectures on Islam as it encountered other world religions — Pre-Islamic Arabia, Judaism and Christianity, Africa, Spain, India, China, and the modern West. It was brilliantly conceived and he was in the process of writing and giving them when he fell ill. And, I think, in his spare time he was compiling a list of idioms in English that came from sports and games for publication in a concise little book on the subject. Even with these many projects undone, he published dozens of articles and books in the course of his busy life.

To introduce the AAR series he spoke at the AAR conference held in Toronto this fall. The conference attracts something like 8,000 professors of religion, and it was a terrific place to inaugurate his lecture series. I came up early for the conference he had helped sponsor in Julia's memory. But before we could get down to business, there were other pressing needs. First we picked up a couple of Volvo Stationwagonfuls of books from the Toronto community and deposited them at Trinity for the Trinity College Book Drive next spring. And then we moved some books around in his apartment, which were scheduled for delivery at several libraries around the East Coast. Then I finally was able to ask him about how to introduce him at the conference.

He told me about several humorous firsts in his career: (1) He became a Presbyterian minister without actually attending divinity school; (2) He gathered the inscriptional data for his dissertation in one day; (3) He learned how to smuggle pork sausage into Israel.

But we can safely add several more extraordinary accomplishments to his modest and humorous self-description: He was a successful, enthusiastic, and passionate scholar who served the field as researcher, administrator, editor, and teacher. He was the model of a family man, who loved completely and selflessly and compassionately. He never tired of enthusiastically investigating new phenomena and celebrating every ethnic group and individual accomplishment. He knew the sorrows of life, and had conquered them with his confidence in humanity. He was a deeply religious man personally and he devoted his life to understanding among religions. The world would be a lot better if there were more people like him.

Amir Hussain, California State University, Northridge, writes . . .

“THERE'S A MESSAGE on the wind / Calling me to glory somewhere”. So go two lines from a song by Richard Thompson that I was listening to on March 6 when I got the news that Willard Gurdon Oxtoby had passed away that morning in Toronto.

Many in the AAR knew Will, so I won't go into detail about his biography. He was born in California in 1933, and earned degrees from Stanford (BA 1955) and Princeton (MA 1961, PhD 1962). After spending time working on the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem, Will taught at McGill, Harvard and Yale before moving to the University of Toronto, where he taught from 1971 to 1999. He was married twice, to Layla Jurji who died in 1980, and to Julia Ching who died in 2001. Will was there for both of them, providing love and support as they both died from cancer.

Earlier this year he was diagnosed with cancer. I last spoke to him six days before his death while he was in the hospital recovering from a round of chemotherapy. He didn't know if the chemo would give him a few more days, a few more months, or a few more years.

I had the privilege of having Will as my teacher as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. He supervised both my MA and my PhD. I learned a tremendous amount from Will, ranging from major issues about religious pluralism, to minor issues like the difference between an "N" dash and an "M" dash. I first learned to teach comparative religion as one of the many teaching assistants for his course on world religions. Out of that developed Will's magisterial two-volume textbook with Oxford University Press.

Like many of you, I will miss Will very much as a teacher, a mentor, a colleague and a friend. ❁

Editor's Note:

Willard G. Oxtoby was the AAR's lecturer for the American Lectures in the History of Religions series during calendar year 2003. He was Professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, where he taught for 28 years, and founding Director of the University of Toronto's Centre for Religious Studies.