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## Editor's Note

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This special issue of the *Edith Wharton Review* grows out of the 2016 American Literature Association panel on “Wharton and Religion,” which included papers by Meredith Goldsmith, Margaret Toth, and Haein Park. Since the publication of Carol Singley’s *Edith Wharton: Matters of Mind and Spirit* (1995), which first revealed the extent and depth of Wharton’s interest in religion, Wharton scholars have mostly focused on other aspects of her work. Similarly, specialists in religion and literature seldom discuss Wharton. Yet the ALA papers uncovered unexpected complexity in this aspect of Wharton’s writing, in works such as *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Summer* (1917), *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1920), and *Twilight Sleep* (1927).

The following pages present one paper from the original ALA panel, plus three additional articles and two archival resources. With contributions from Canada, Japan, and Jordan as well as the United States, this special issue includes a global range of perspectives on Wharton and religion.

Meredith Goldsmith opens the issue with her article, “‘Like the Heathen’: Liminality, Ritual, and Religious Authority in *Summer*,” an expansion of her ALA paper. Goldsmith reveals how Wharton strategically marks the formative transitions in Charity’s life with religious imagery, language, and ritual. Figures such as Reverend Miles and the tent evangelist both highlight Charity’s defiance and oversee her passage from her Mountain origin to her marriage in North Dormer. Careful variations in minor characters and motifs show Wharton’s awareness of the fault-lines within early twentieth-century religious culture—the conflict between Episcopalians and Baptists in North Dormer, the connections between evangelism and consumer culture in Nettleton, and the role of itinerant preachers in rural communities. In contrast to these, ritual emerges as a unifying force, problematic but resolving liminality.

While Goldsmith juxtaposes ritual and consumerism as opposed agents of assimilation, Margaret Toth addresses the symbiosis of money and spirituality in her article, “Spiritual Practitioners, Storytelling Markets, and the Economics of Consolation in Wharton’s Postwar Fiction.” Toth examines the female characters who perform their spiritualistic practices for an income and in the process generate new ethical systems. While their authenticity remains ambiguous, these mediums provide genuine consolation to their clients. They also negotiate survival methods for women who do not fit normative structures related to gender and religion. Toth later compares these female spiritual practitioners to the writers facing marketplace dilemmas in Wharton’s postwar fiction.

Turning from economic to discursive power, Marwan Obeidat and Nazmi al-Shalabi examine the figure of Islam in Wharton’s work. In “The Dark Side of the Moon: Edith Wharton’s Fictional Treatment of Islam in *In Morocco* and ‘The Seed of the Faith,’” Obeidat and al-Shalabi show how *In Morocco* uses a fictionalized view of Islam to reinforce orientalist patterns that were inherited from nineteenth-century travel writing and utilized by French colonialism. In *In Morocco*, Islam figures more as a culture or as a politics than as a religion. However, the fictional short story “The Seed of the Faith” may have been more accurate than the nonfiction travel book in its critical depiction of orientalist dynamics.

The fourth paper, “Because He’s Not Here’: Edith Wharton’s Study in the Afterlife, Ghosts, and the Art of Belief,” comes from Yuki Miyazawa, who approaches Wharton’s ghosts not simply as tropes for biographical or social critique but as ghosts, signs of a soul after physical death. The ghost story, he argues, attracted Wharton because it allowed her to speculate on metaphysical matters for which there was otherwise no room in modern life. As a genre, it created a space to prolong literary tradition, to enable authorial afterlives, and to make present a type of belief within the context of a skeptical age. The pleasure of the ghost story, including spine-tingling fear, rewards the suspension of disbelief.

Following these articles, the “From the Archives” section offers two resources for future scholarship on Wharton and religion. Sally Jones provides a description of Wharton’s personal Bible and the specific passages that Wharton marked, most of them concentrated on the theme of wisdom. Wharton’s active vertical lines, underscores, or Xs identify some significant new passages of interest to Wharton in addition to those mentioned in *A Backward Glance* (1934) and the unpublished “Life and I” and *Literature*.

Last but not least, Sheila Liming provides a helpful list of “Religious Texts in Edith Wharton’s Library.” Although this list only includes books currently

housed at The Mount, it reveals how Wharton's inquiries into religion ranged far beyond her Episcopalian childhood to areas such as French medieval mystics, German higher criticism, classical mythology, Islam, Celtic paganism, and even witches. The texts include anthropological, historical, philosophical, literary, theological, and biographical approaches. They also show the attention to research that may have informed works such as *The Valley of Decision* (1902) and "All Souls" (1937).

These articles touch the surface of a rich lode, and historically it is an exciting time for further research on Wharton and religion, since the study of religion and literature itself is undergoing a transformation in the United States. Journals such as *Early American Literature*, *American Literary History*, and *American Literature* have all devoted special issues to religion, in 2010, 2014, and 2014, respectively. Journals specializing in religion and literature have produced comprehensive reviews of the field, including new theoretical advances: *Religion and Literature* (in 2009 and 2014) and *Christianity and Literature* (in 2009). More recently, Cambridge University Press and Routledge have each published a *Companion to Literature and Religion* (2016). Perhaps the most significant development has been the rise of postsecular theory, which began in the mid-twentieth century but became more visible after 9/11, perhaps most influentially in the work of Charles A. Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Talal Asad, and John McClure. Among scholars of American literature in the United States, the "postsecular" indicates a mentality that recognizes the ideological limits of secularism in a post-9/11 age yet does not return to an advocacy of religious belief. No longer assuming secularity as the inevitable condition of modernity, postsecular theory attempts to create more supple intellectual approaches to religion. The practical consequences in terms of reading and criticism are currently being developed, as seen in recent panels of the American Literature Association (2017) and Modern Language Association (2018).

Perhaps these developments will help empower fresh approaches to Wharton and religion. According to Wharton's autobiographical writings, religion enabled Wharton's first awakening to the beauty and power of language; it opened the way for her first crush, on the Reverend Dr. Edward A. Washburn, which lasted three or four years; and it led to a significant early friendship, with Dr. Washburn's daughter Emilyn, who encouraged Wharton's study of languages and texts. Many of the entries in her deeply personal notebook, "Quaderno Dello Studente," include quotations from religious texts or remarks on God, and a religious statement in Latin appears as the epitaph on Wharton's tombstone. While endowed with a healthy skepticism and irony, Wharton

continued to observe and reflect on religion in its many varieties throughout her career. Hopefully, this special issue will be the beginning of a scholarly conversation instead of the last word on the topic.

Finally, we welcome Paul Ohler as the new editor of the *Edith Wharton Review*, and Shannon Brennan as the new book review editor. We also express our deep thanks to the outgoing editor, Meredith Goldsmith, whose years at the journal have transformed it profoundly, expanding it as a scholarly forum and overseeing its transition to a new format and publisher. Her energy, vision, and wisdom have greatly benefited Wharton scholarship, and she will be greatly missed.

Sharon Kim, *guest editor*