

Robert Wood Lynn, leader in religion scholarship, dies at age 93

In 15 years at the Lilly Endowment, he went beyond merely giving grants, fostering study of core issues in American religious life.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [November 7, 2018](#) issue



Robert Wood Lynn. Photo courtesy of the Lynn family.

Robert Wood Lynn, an influential Christian educator who served as senior vice president for religion for the Lilly Endowment, died in Scarborough, Maine, on October 7 at age 93.

In a 1989 article in *Newsweek* on the occasion of Lynn's retirement from Lilly, Kenneth L. Woodward described how Lynn had "fostered a remarkable renaissance in religious scholarship in the United States and established the main lines of religious inquiry well into the 21st century."

Through his role at Lilly beginning in 1974, Lynn distributed \$100 million in hundreds of grants for research into theological education, church-state relations, and the challenges facing Christian denominations and congregational leaderships.

"Robert Wood Lynn was a master teacher, but in a quite unusual way," wrote Craig Dykstra, Lynn's successor at Lilly, who is now a senior fellow at Duke Divinity School, in an email. "Rather than focusing first on who would get grants from the endowment and for what purposes, Lynn's genius was to conceive of the religion division as a center of learning. Over and over again, he would convene thoughtful religious institutional leaders and scholars, engage them in sustained conversation in ways that enabled them to dig deep into the most fundamental issues facing American religious life, and create among them a context for mutual support and collaboration."

Prior to his time at Lilly, Lynn was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and head of its Auburn Seminary program, where he was an early advocate of the historical study of how Christian faith and practice was taught in America.

"Robert Lynn had more influence on American religion, and on mainline Protestantism in particular, than any of us know," wrote James P. Wind, former head of the Alban Institute, who was mentored by Lynn, in an email. "Lynn was a visionary and strategic thinker who sensed earlier than most how the dynamic American environment of the late 20th century was challenging the nation's religious communities in ways that its leaders did not understand. . . . He helped American denominational leaders, theological educators, and the clergy who led America's churches and synagogues get a clear sense of what they were dealing with and how they could respond."

Lynn served as associate pastor at a Presbyterian church in Denver between graduating from Yale Divinity School and pursuing his doctorate in practical theology at Union.

"He was a model of the learned minister, well read, constantly seeking to learn," said Wind. He "deeply valued the treasures of the great religious traditions and

relentlessly searched for ways to unleash them for the common good.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “People: Robert Wood Lynn.”