



## Foreword to special volume in the memory of Professor Joseph T. O’Connell

With Professor Joseph T. O’Connell first I came in contact during 2005 when I assumed as the Chair, Department of Philosophy and Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati University where Comparative Religion courses are taught and researched as separate are of study for more than six decades. Joe had been visiting Santiniketan since nineteen sixties with his wife Kathy O’Connell, a distinguished Tagore scholar in her own right. He wrote to me expressing his desire to visit our department for a month to which we very happily agreed. Since then we had a wonderful relationship not just academic but also as human. On the way, I discovered myself and developed new interests in Academic Study of Religion. His interest in Indian religions goes back to student days and whole life with his distinguished career<sup>1</sup> he remained devoted to the study of religions and promoting the study. Almost for a decade, every year he was visiting Visva-Bharati, he called himself an Annual Academic Visitor, delivering lectures, helping to update the syllabus for Religion courses at various levels and understanding the discipline of religious studies with his long experience in the West. For us it was easy to communicate with him as he not only studied Indian religions but also spent most of his life in India for over six decades. He was also instrumental to anchorage Professor Kazi Nurul Islam to establish Department of World Religions and Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue at Dhaka University, Bangladesh.

I have written in details elsewhere, how I was drawn by Joe and Professor Ivan Khan to the study of religion, being a student of logic and analytic ethics since 2003 onwards. Though study of religion and religious life is part of the daily life of every Indian/Asian, not much attention is paid to the ‘academic

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see in this volume: Sander, Å. (2016). A brief overview of the research interest and works of Joseph T. O’Connell. *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, 6(1), 15–18; and Hussain, A. (2016). Professor Joseph T. O’Connell: A remembrance. *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal*, 6(1), 19–20.

study of religion' in India as religion is often studied under social sciences and not as a separate discipline. Joe believed, aftermath of 9/11 academic study of religion, which even now is an overwhelmingly Western enterprise, conducted mostly in English and a few European languages, should draw scholars from non-Western cultures into a more cosmopolitan fellowship of academic study, research and teaching about religion. He argued in favour of scholarship, broadened participation and anticipated enhanced mutual understanding. To promote such understanding one need to prepare introductory texts in regional languages and for translations of strategic readings and argued for several ways in which such bilingual scholarship might be implemented in academic study of religion in South Asia, with special focus on Visva-Bharati University in India and the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh.

But he also had realized that the issues, theoretical and practical, of highest priority for academic study of religion in India and elsewhere in South Asia do not necessarily coincide with those in the West. That holds true when we consider the category 'secular', again in theoretical as well as practical terms, in relation to academic study of religion. While there has been for some time no little reflection and debate on the relation of the 'secular' to the 'religious' (especially when construed as 'secularism' *vs.* 'fundamentalism') in South Asia as pertinent in politics, there has been relatively little attention given to how these categories and the phenomena they attempt to conceptualize impact upon teaching and research about religion as is done and may yet be done in India, Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia.

Realizing the significant potential of religious traditions in India to contribute to a more globally adequate conceptual framework or discourse for 'method and theory' in the study of religion, from classical to modern, he suggested that scholars native to and/or based in India, despite facing obstacles in other ways, may be especially well positioned to develop such potential for enriching and broadening the global thought about 'method and theory'. Some of the examples he gave were the long history of systematic Indian attempts at understanding the diversity of human religious (including religio-philosophic and religio-communal) diversity, as present within religiously plural India and the 'argumentative Indian' tradition; the presence of clusters of religious ideas, sentiments and practices shaped and refined over centuries in India serve to motivate, guide and refine the religious, as well as philosophic, ethical and aesthetic, experience of human beings, that is systems of personal transformation (*yoga, sadhāna*) and religious aesthetics; and the wealth of symbolically pregnant religious terms-cum-categories elaborated and refined again and again over centuries in India, that is *dharma, māyā, līla, rasa, sabaja, etc.* Surely some of these have been discussed by Indian and non-Indian scholars at length, the distinctiveness and subtleties of most have not yet been all that widely integrated into what we might call the emerging global lexicon for 'academic study of religion'.

All these thoughts were deep convictions with which Joe O'Connell lived all through his life and tried to make them real, his active involvement with Visva-Bharati and Dhaka was the proof. He not only helped us to revise and update the syllabus of religion courses at various levels, with utmost sincerity, but also helped to acquire about twenty books from Toronto and gifting them to us to encourage students, and make use of them. We were also planning to work on a series of edited volumes as reading material for Academic Study of Religion courses in Indian/Asian context to be prepared by a team of scholars from India, Asia and global context and he had expressed his keen interest to be associated in a lead role and was eager to see what thoughts we at Visva-Bharati and elsewhere in India have to offer on the subject.

The meeting of International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) in 2010, in Toronto was an important step for all of us who are involved towards academic study of religion in Asia as Joe and Ivan Khan brought most of us together to the extent that Joe hosted three of us at his home; me, Madhu Khanna (Jamia Milia Islamia) and Vellakuddy Alagaratnam (Sri Lanka). It was in Toronto that we discussed the possibility of publishing the articles by the scholars who have been engaged and presenting at different meetings since 2003, and Joe was very keen on it. We are extremely happy that finally we have been able to work out a special volume of *Argument: Biannual Philosophical Journal* on academic study of religion in Asia. Certainly Joe would be delighted to see this volume.

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