



Joseph Jordens
(1925–2008)

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Dr Joseph Teresa Florent Jordens was a friend and colleague of mine for twenty years, from 1970 to 1990, a period during which we each served terms as Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University. I was Dean at the time of his retirement (31 December 1990), and so presided over the farewell dinner held in his honour. He being three years older than me, the occasion gave me cause to reflect, ‘What you were, I am; what you are, I will be!’ During these years we shared a warm collegiality, and endured together the fortunes and misfortunes of the Faculty of Asian Studies, and with it, on the local scene, what might be called the rise and fall of Asian Studies in Australia.

Jos (as friends and colleagues knew him) achieved international recognition for pioneering work on Indian cultural history, illumined by a remarkable empathy for the spiritual traditions of Hinduism. He was born in Belgium in 1925, and his journey from the Flemish city of Leuven (Louvain) to Australia for an academic career, first at the University of Melbourne and then at the Australian National University in Canberra, was by way of an unconventional but profoundly enriching detour. On graduating from high school in 1943, he entered the Jesuit order.

The Jesuits have a distinguished tradition of scholarship in Indian Studies, and after two years’ novitiate and two years of preliminary study as part of his training, in 1947, Jos was enrolled in the faculty of Oriental Studies of the renowned University of Louvain. In 1952, he completed his doctoral thesis entitled *The Idea of the Divine in the Bhagavad Gita*, which was awarded with the commendation *maxima cum laude*. It was a sublime topic, devoted to one of the greatest classics of world religious literature. His study, under the guidance of the renowned scholar of early Buddhism Etienne Lamotte, involved a close analysis of the tradition out of which the *Gita* had grown, a tradition represented in the Vedas, Brahmanas and Upanishads and other expressions of philosophical Hinduism.

These studies were designed to prepare him for educational work and Christian witness in India. Thus after completing his doctorate, in 1953, he travelled to India to complement his academic studies with a direct experience of Indian life and culture. India, with its bursting vitality, disorder and colour, after the grey skies and predictable orderliness of Belgium was a new world, one in which he found inspiration. He taught Sanskrit at a Jesuit college in Calcutta, he learned Hindi, he travelled to the foothills of the Himalayas, he explored some of the architectural wonders of various parts of India, and revelled in the variety and sheer physical vitality of Indian life. Then, in 1957, after fourteen years as a Jesuit, he decided not to proceed to the final stage of membership of the order by ordination as a priest. He resigned from it, and decided to pursue an academic career in Indian Studies, one for which he was more than amply qualified. He had studied the roots of Indian culture, and lived an intense life in India among Indians of diverse backgrounds. He had done so as a Jesuit, from the bottom up, in an Independent India; not as a European administrator, from the top down.

To realise this ideal he went to Australia. In 1957, this choice might have been thought of as prompted either by inspiration or lunacy. But it was a time when Australians were becoming aware of their geographical position in a post-1945 world, and the then Menzies government was laying the foundations for what was later to be called 'Asian Literacy' as a national need. He made his decision for Melbourne. At first, having acquired a Diploma of Education (1959), for three years he taught French, German and Indian History at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School and Scotch College. But in 1961 he was appointed to the University of Melbourne as, in effect, founder of the first Department of Indian Studies at an Australian university. In assessing his qualifications, the academic bureaucracy had concerns as to whether it could recognise a doctorate awarded by the University of Louvain! In Melbourne, he established courses in ancient and traditional Indian culture, religion and philosophy. His work there culminated in an academic year as Visiting Professor in Indian Religions at the Department of Indian Studies of the University of Wisconsin (1968–69).

In the meantime, the Australian National University had added South Asia to its existing programmes in Chinese, Indonesian and Japanese Studies. In 1965, it made two professorial appointments: one a philologist, J.W. de Jong, a scholar in Buddhist philology; the other a historian, A.L. Basham, arguably at that time the greatest living historian of Classical India. To extend the teaching of Indian history to the modern period, in 1970 he appointed Jos to the Department of Asian Civilisations, which he (Basham) then headed. As a historian of Indian culture, he was deeply aware that Indian history was not that of the British Raj, but of the peoples of India, and the living lines of continuity with their traditional cultures that were being transformed into a nation of the modern world – a task for which Jos with his classical training was uniquely qualified.

In the mid-sixties, for those concerned with the study of Asia, well might it be said that, 'bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!'

The promise and achievement of Australia in the field was such that in January 1971, thanks to the inspired support of the then Vice-Chancellor, Sir John Crawford, the ANU was host to the 28th International Congress of Oriental Studies, an event which attracted over a thousand scholars of Asia (and North Africa) from all over the world.

In Canberra, Jos worked with enthusiasm, developing new courses, among them an advanced year Indian History unit, 'From the Mutiny to Independence', and taking part in the day-to-day chores of faculty business. But he did not neglect research. The focus of his work was the transformations developing within Hinduism in response to the challenges of modernity. A major project was a biography of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj, an important and influential nineteenth-century Hindu reform movement. For a variety of reasons, this was no easy task. But supported by an ANU Leverhulme Foundation Fellowship, Jos spent the long vacation of '72-'73 searching for primary material in libraries in North India, rediscovering some that had been thought lost, others that had been deliberately suppressed or even destroyed. The result was an important and original book, *Dayananda Saraswati: His Life and Ideas*, published by OUP Delhi in 1979. A substantial as well as pioneering work, it was well reviewed: 'A fine intellectual portrait' – revealing 'An impressive knowledge of Indian lore, philosophy and religious culture', as one reviewer put it. It established itself as a standard work. It was reprinted in paperback in 1997, and again elicited enthusiastic reviews. Jos continued his work in this field by a study of Swami Shradhdhananda, an early twentieth-century leader of the movement, publishing a book 'on his life and his causes' in 1981.

In 1982, he was elected Dean of the Faculty, and so became virtually a full-time administrator. He was to serve two three-year terms. He became Dean at a particularly difficult time. This was in the wake of the 1979 review of the Faculty, which involved a restructuring of its administrative organisation, requiring a disciplinary core to the degrees it offered, and the devisal of ways in which the courses it offered might be integrated with those provided in other faculties. The changes were timely, but difficult to implement, and involved endless committee work. More seriously, they occurred at a time when financial pressures were beginning to bite. By 1975, it was already clear that the hopes for the future, which in 1971 had seemed so bright, would not be fulfilled. By 1985, the Faculty was virtually a disaster area. Jos had held the view that a compulsory age of retirement had the merit that it made possible the infusion of fresh blood and new developments. But now, the vacating of a post by retirement or resignation – and the timing of such events was by the very nature of the case arbitrary – meant that the position vacated was either disestablished or reallocated to the strongest of competing interests elsewhere in the Faculties, in the light of what one might politely refer to as *arbitrium popularis aerae*. Educational priorities were subordinated to short-term tastes and fashions. Any consideration of the needs of a proper foundation for the study of the humanities in an Asian cultural setting when determining priorities was *force majeure* abandoned.

As a result, staff morale was damaged, a damage exacerbated by the excesses of postmodernism, by an exaggerated sensitivity to 'political correctness' and by the fact that 'orientalist' had become a dirty word that, astutely directed, could destroy a career, and even a field of study. These factors led to tensions within and pressures from without the faculty, resulting in rivalries, mutual distrust and bitterness. Jos worked calmly and valiantly to navigate these troubled waters, though the responsibilities he carried put him under great strain. It was a matter of deep sorrow as well as bewilderment to him that by the early 1990s, after his retirement, the South Asia programme of the Faculty, which when he joined it in 1970 had six members, had been reduced to a solitary one.

It was a relief after two terms as Dean, during which he served the Faculty well, that he was able to return to research, and devoted himself to a major study of Gandhi's personal religion based on the ninety volumes of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. I had the honour of chairing his valedictory lecture on this massive project on 14 November 1990. The result, after seven years of work, *Gandhi's Religion: A Homespun Shawl*, was published by Macmillan (St. Martin's Press in the USA) on 31 January 1998, the fiftieth anniversary of Gandhi's assassination.

This book was a fitting crown to his career, bringing together all the themes and aspirations of his life. It was warmly received, one reviewer describing it as 'an outstanding exposition of how Gandhi, in his quite individualistic way, created a rich, religious "homespun shawl", which contained strands of Jain asceticism, the *sannyasin* ideal, love, *Advaita* and service to society'.

Jos's career was not without honour. He was elected as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1984, and in 2001 received the Belgian accolade or appointment as an Officer in the Order of Leopold for Academic Achievements in the Field of Indian Studies. He was, however, a person of extreme modesty. Few colleagues outside his field were aware of his language skills – Sanskrit, and other of the classical languages of India, and the modern national language Hindi along with provincial languages such as Gujerati; or that as a doctoral student in 1953 he had conducted the public defence of his thesis in Latin. Neither were they aware of the quality of his work, or the significance of his contribution to Indian Studies in Australia.

He is survived by Ann-Mari, his wife of forty-six years, their children, one sadly predeceasing them, and their grandchildren. Along with them, we, his friends and erstwhile colleagues, miss him and farewell him, while wishing him well on a new journey with that marvellous Sanskrit invocation and prayer,

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Emeritus Professor Anthony H. (Tony) Johns