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Professor Joseph T. O'Connell: A Remembrance

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OBITUARY / POŻEGNANIE

Professor Joseph T. O’Connell: A remembrance

At home, I have one picture of my teacher, Professor Joseph T. O’Connell, taken sometime around 1995. Not surprisingly, he’s surrounded by a group of graduate students in religion at the University of Toronto. What may be surprising to those who didn’t know Joe was that the picture was taken after one of our intramural softball games. Although he lived in Canada for decades, Joe was a good American, and part of that meant a love for baseball, a passion which he shared with his students. So Joe not only taught us about religion, he participated in the ordinariness of our lives.

I met Joe in the fall of 1987, as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto. I took his ‘Religions of the World’ course, co-taught by Joe, Willard Oxtoby, and Julia Ching. The course began with Eastern traditions, and we started with Joe’s lectures on Hinduism. A few years later, I began the graduate program at the university’s Centre for Religious Studies, under Will Oxtoby’s supervision. I never took another course with Joe, but we remained in conversation about religion, especially his work in Bangladesh and where that intersected with my interests on Islam in South Asia.

I moved to Southern California a decade later, and in 2005 took on my current position at the Jesuit university in Los Angeles. When I returned to Toronto on trips to visit family, I sought out Joe and Kathleen for advice about negotiating a Catholic university. As always, they were extraordinarily kind and generous with their insight.

Anyone that was fortunate enough to take a course with Joe, or even to talk with him for a few minutes, learned about what an excellent teacher he was. He was always calm, with a lovely sense of humor. And as noted above, he cared about his students as people, took an interest in us, and not just the things that we had learned. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until after his death that I learned about the depth and importance of his scholarship. I knew, of course, that he was an important scholar, with a Ph.D. from Harvard and tenure at the University of Toronto. But since I hadn’t read his work, I didn’t know the impact of his scholarship.

At the time of Joe's death, I was the editor for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Rachel McDermott did a lovely remembrance for us in the December 2012 issue. It was only then, in editing Rachel's in memoriam for publication, that I realized the depth and breadth of Joe's publication record. It was phenomenal, of the kind that you expect from any top scholar of religion. That he could do this while being such a great teacher and mentor was completely unexpected.

And of course, Joe was concerned with the world, not simply with his life in Canada and the United States. His work with the University of Dhaka for over a decade in establishing their world religions program speaks to that concern. It's a treat, every now and then, to meet a scholar from there, who was there because of Joe. He was an extraordinary human being, teacher, and scholar. In my university, we often use the phrase 'teacher-scholar' as an ideal for what we hope to achieve. Joe lived out that ideal.

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