

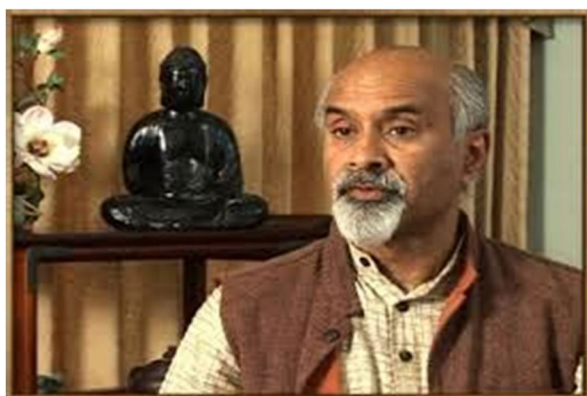


In Memoriam

Dr. Joseph Prabhu

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Joseph Benedict Prabhu (lovingly as ‘JB’) breathed his last on the evening of Monday 27 September 2021, at their home in Los Angeles (USA); wife Betty Bamberg and Joseph’s daughter, Tara, were by his bedside when he passed away peacefully. The first symptoms of a bladder discomfiture showed up at East–West Philosophers’ Conference in Honolulu in May 2016 while we were at a post-Raimon Panikkar event dinner; by July, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer. After the ensuing intensive treatment through Fall 2016, Joseph made complete recovery and went about his busy life as usual, doing the rounds of conferences and various seminars, locally in the States and in Austria and Italy. He and Betty also travelled to India, Croatia, England, Scotland and Ireland, and Toronto, before the COVID-19 pandemic prevented further travels. However, in March 2020, Joseph was diagnosed with

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metastatic brain cancer, and so the last six months of his health condition placed severe constraints on his movement and work-a-day life.

Joseph hailed from a Konkani Catholic family in Mangalore, India, who later moved to Bangalore. (The surname 'Prabhu' is common among the Konkani dialect-speaking Catholics of Latin Rite in that state of [Karnataka]). Born in Mangalore, raised and educated in Kolkata, he attended St. Xavier's College studying under Belgium Jesuits who molded the early character of his life; he also served as Mother Teresa's first altar boy in India. Joseph moved in the mid-1960s to New Delhi for undergraduate studies at St Stephen's College (University of Delhi) and then graduate studies in Economics at the Delhi School of Economics where he met the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen; a three-year scholarship from All-India Catholic Union took him to Germany and Cambridge to study philosophy. (He would often mention the influence of Jürgen Habermas during his time in Germany, where he would also begin a deeper study of G. W. F. Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard.) Later, he moved to the USA to do his PhD at Boston College and after that to teach at Cal State LA.

Joseph was a veritable polymath, known in his professional-vocational life as a prominent philosopher of religion in the cross-cultural mode, with sound scholarly handle on the works of the Catalan-Nair philosopher and reformist Catholic priest, Dr. Raimon Panikkar (his key mentor and influence, who developed an advaitic Cosmotheandric *theo-sophia*, and claimed at once to be Buddhist, Hindu, and Secular); but also on Hegel and Kierkegaard, M.K. Gandhi (especially Gandhian economics and political thought), Indian Ethics, and Hindu-Christian Studies. Joseph's interests ranged to ecological studies, postcoloniality and secularism, postmodernism and *a/* theology, cosmology, and spirituality. When I took over editorship of *Sophia*, Joseph was there guiding me and ever-ready to referee material for the journal and for the *Sophia* book series; he also worked on book reviews for *Sophia*. A regular presence at RISA (Religions in South Asia), Hinduism, DANAM, Buddhism, and Philosophy of Religion sessions of the AAR and APA (Pacific), Joseph was never shy of standing up to direct sharp questions at the speakers, whether in plenary or workshop or general sessions. He would whisk me away to events such as the screening of the documentary by Sue Bailey Thurman and the activist theologian Howard Thurman's unprecedented (for Blacks) visit to India in the mid-1930s to meet with Tagore and Gandhi, and the indefatigable Joseph would end the evening attending multiple receptions. I have not known anyone to have achieved such an omnipresence.

In addition, Joseph was a stalwart of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (served as SACP's President 2008–2009), of East–West Philosophers Conference (every 4 years in Honolulu, since 1984 where I first met him). He had quite a following also in Germany among ecumenical theologians inspired by Hans Küng, the radical Catholic theologian. It follows that religious pluralism was a passionate commitment of Joseph's.

At the time of his untimely passing, Joseph was Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus) at California State University LA and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. He was editor of the monograph *The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar* and co-editor (with Purushottama Bilimoria and Renuka

Sharma) of *Indian Ethics: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges* (Routledge, 2007; 2017). He contributed to the *Routledge History of Indian Philosophy* (2018, 2020); *Religion and Postcolonialism*, and wrote a number of journal articles, academic papers, book reviews, or comments thereto.

In addition, he authored *Raimon Panikkar, a Modern Spiritual Master*; and *Liberating Gandhi: Religion and a Culture of Peace* (both forthcoming). His last publication for us would arguably be the chapter ‘Conditions for Interreligious Hospitality,’ in Rita Sherma and P. Bilimoria (eds.) *Religion & Sustainability: Interreligious Resources, Interdisciplinary Responses*, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Book Series (Springer 2022).

He was appointed a Senior Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, and the Martin Marty Centre at the University of Chicago. He co-chaired the Southern California Parliament of the World’s Religions and was Trustee Emeritus of the Parliament of the World’s Religions. He was also a significant member of the Southern California South Asia Studies Group. California State University LA has honoured him by instituting an annual lecture series in his name.

Most recently, Joseph was actively involved in the NEH/WABASH funded Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion working group within AAR. In India, Joseph had a visible presence in number of areas, from his own connections with the Catholic Church, Rev Dom Bede Griffiths, Fr. Michael Amoladoss S.J., through to the Templeton Foundation project on Science and Spirituality Research in India (that I established with Phillip Clayton in Bangalore). When the late Indian science laureate, Prof. Raja Ramana, was planning an All-India centre for Advanced Studies on the coattails of the Indian Institute of Science/C V Raman Research Institute, in Bangalore, he called on Paṇḍita K. T. Pandurangi who (being my Mīmāṃsā mentor) in turn called me in and I called in Joseph (we happened to be in Bangalore then). Our joint message at the meeting in IISc to Raja Ramana was to ensure that the Humanities and Social Sciences, especially Philosophy, and if possible Comparative Religion (to be one of its kind in India), are given central focus at the Institute. He took our suggestion in humility, and at least Social Sciences and Philosophy are to this day strongly represented in what has come to be the National Institute of Advanced Studies (alas, not noted in the plaque of inauguration; although one of us did have the honour of being the Homi J. Bhabha Visiting Professor for a short while).

I spoke with Joseph some four weeks before his demise, shortly upon being released from hospital, confident in his usual esteemed spirit that he was on his way to full recovery, again. He asked, however, to be relieved of commitments on certain projects we had been engaged in, urging with a sense of urgency that he intended to devote his precious time in his current weakened capacity to completing his personal memoir—for which he would be interviewing a host of his friends and colleagues who have been part of his life’s journey. We were to meet in LA in October, but, alas, it was not to be.

On personal note, in 1984 East–West Philosophers’ Conference in Honolulu, I came across a young scholar about my age, complete with black goatee and flowing hair, wearing bright red Indian *kurta*, white rajput pants, and jodhpur sandals.

We hit off instantly, and found that Raimond Panikkar and Ninian Smart were among our common mentors.

Henceforth, whenever I would come to North America from Australia for conferences, my first stop was at relatives' home in Culver City; within hours, either Joseph Prabhu or Christopher Chapple (of LMU up the road), or both, would arrive to greet me, and make plans for events on my return journey. I would often visit him in his Altadena home, at his college, or find him in the nearby Huntington Library (with its grand botanical vista) where he frequented for quiet studies. Whenever a closed one passed away in the families across the Pacific or Indian Ocean—such as the beloved Renuka, Devi, or Joseph's mother—there'd be a remote phone conversation of solace and in due course personal meeting or even memorial gathering towards alleviating grief.

After delivering the keynote at the Australasian-SACP conference in Melbourne, 2004, Joseph visited the renown Venus Bay kutir, where the resident shitsu-terrier Devi fell in love with him and would keep his company the entire four days that we worked on the two volumes of Indian Ethics and annotations (for studies) on Hegel, Raimon Pannikar, J. N. Mohanty and Phenomenology, Ninian Smart, Wilhelm Halbfass, and Fred Dallmayr. In the evenings, over a glass of nearby-Koonwarra plonk, we would read poetry of Hölderlin, Rilke, and Sri Aurobindo.

At a niece's wedding in Los Angeles, after a couple of Amarettos, I tried to draw a sigh but athlete Joseph—and Chris Chapple who was also a guest—to the beat of Rock-n-Bhangra on the dance floor, but to no avail; he said later he derived his rhythm-and-*neela-pīlā* from yoga and meditation each morning! I remain Joseph's simulation (simulacrum), and we were often got taken for brothers, if not mistaken for each other, or apparitionally as *buddhivān incarnatio*. A memorable quote of Joseph's lives on in our midst:

Action brings insight into dynamic motion, and insight without thoughtful action, to my mind, is seriously incomplete.

In Joseph Prabhu, we have lost a scholar, colleague, friend, Gandhian Christian, husband, brother, father, uncle, and grandfather, and a decent, ever curious and caringly empathic (*sorge*) fellow human being: a *mahottama* indeed.

gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā

Adieu

(With input from Betty Bamberg and nephew Jaideep Prabhu)

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