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Editorial

It is with enormous pleasure that we introduce this special edition of the *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* in honour of Professor Brian Bocking. The papers presented here, by some of the best scholars in the field, are a tribute to the accomplishments and contributions Brian Bocking has made to the academic study of religions, a field of study he has helped to shape and a disciplinary identity and title that he has tirelessly defended. This *Festschrift* stands testimony to the significant impact Brian Bocking's scholarship has had on a range of diverse fields, from Japanese Buddhist thought to RE in contemporary Ireland, and points to the very great respect with which he is held by those that have worked alongside him over the past 35 years or more.

In a nutshell Brian Bocking's career included establishing the Religious Studies/Study of Religions Department at the University of Stirling (1977-1986) (during his time at Stirling, Brian was a Visiting Lecturer at the Institute of Philosophy and Thought, University of Tsukuba, Japan (1981-82)), the founding of the Study of Religions Department at Bath Spa University (1986-1999), where he became Professor, as well as playing a crucial role in developing the Study of Religions Department at SOAS (1999-2007). Finally, he went on to lay the foundations of the only Study of Religions Department in Ireland at University College, where he was Professor and Head of Department for seven years (2008-2015).

The primary motivation for this Special Edition is to ensure that this final chapter in Brian's career, the pivotal role he played in establishing the academic study of religions in Ireland, through both his work in founding the *Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* (and tirelessly serving as the society's first Secretary), and as the first Professor of the Study of Religions at University College Cork, is marked for posterity (see further the articles by Scharbrodt and Morgan in this volume). The Editors of this edition have each had the good fortune and pleasure of working with Brian at University College Cork and of sitting with him on the committee of the *Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions*. The years between 2008 and 2015 were formative for the discipline of the study of religions in Ireland but also for the teaching and

research careers of many scholars that Brian was instrumental in bringing together either as colleagues at UCC (see Guzy's article in this volume) or collaborators in his wide-ranging scholarly activities. Laurence Cox and Mihirini Sirisena both collaborated with Brian in the Irish 'turn' in the study of global Buddhism and the Buddhist Crossroads project, publications and events. Brian organised conferences such as the international conference on Religious Education, RE21 (August 2013), that were ground-breaking within the Irish context and to which renowned international scholars such as Tim Jensen, a long-time co-traveller in the world of European and International associations of the study of religions, participated. Brian organised a conference on 'Emerging Trends and Developments in Sikh and Punjabi Studies' (March 2014) to which Tadhg Foley contributed and which was hosted at University College Cork in collaboration with the Irish Sikh community.

This *Festschrift* also stands testimony of course to the significance of Brian Bocking's scholarship and personality in the field of the study of East Asian religions. Brian Bocking's PhD supervisor Michael Pye, his colleagues from his time at SOAS, Kate Crosby and Tim Barrett, Ian Reader, a long time fellow UK scholar of Japanese Religions and finally one of Brian's own PhD students from the SOAS years, Stefania Travagnin, have each contributed works on various aspects of Japanese, Chinese and Burmese Buddhism.

This volume also contains a contribution from Marion Bowman on a topic which intersects with Brian Bocking's recent interest in the changing religious landscape in 21st century, post-abuse scandal Ireland. His contribution in this area has been mostly in the area of the practice and discourses on Religious Education in Ireland. Contributions from Tim Jensen, Denise Cush and Catherine Robinson point to Brian's scholarly input in this area and situate his interventions in the context of broader pan-European calls for a pluralistic, non-confessional study of religions for all and at all levels, from schools through to university-level education.

We offer this collection of essays as a symbol of our gratitude for lessons patiently taught, our appreciation for advice generously given and of our acknowledgement of his valuable role within, and important contributions to, our discipline. Overall, we dedicate this collection as a mark of our great respect for our friend and colleague Professor Brian Bocking.