



06 Shap Jubilee – the Presidential Address

When I was younger, my ego was equal to anything. No matter what I was asked to do or whatever job or role was thrust upon me, my default assumption was that I could and, perhaps more tellingly, that I should, do it. After all, who could do it better?

But latterly, I am increasingly aware of my limitations and I think – I hope – I place myself more modestly in the pantheon!

And on no occasion more forcefully than the utterly unexpected invitation to serve as Shap's third – and final - President. For very many years, Shap lived comfortably without a president. Indeed, in the early years no-one was so elevated and its leading lights were Chairs and Vice-Chairs. But somewhere along the way, Ninian Smart, progenitor and midwife of the Shap Working Party, was lifted to that dizzy height. And quite right too. Without doubt, he was the premier voice in popularising what Shap was talking about. World religions were the topic of the day. Restricting the education we gave to our young people for life in the latter half of the 20th century to Christianity, and a particularly emasculated version of that too, was no way to acquit ourselves of our responsibility to prepare pupils and students for the world they would enter.

Ninian was a populariser as his TV programmes made clear. Larger than life and flamboyant, he exuded commitment to the task, embodiment of the love of the study of the wonderful and diverse phenomena that make up the world's religious answers to humanity's continuing questions, and all of this, perhaps presciently, at a time when one might have been forgiven for thinking that religion was generally on the way out. After all, in the late 60s what was happening?

Young people were casting off the constraints and instructions of their 'elders and betters'. Not only was 'tradition' no longer binding, it might even be disqualifying! Though there was a trend towards aspects of some eastern religions in the west (thanks Beatles), the majority assumption was that the world was secularising and religion would soon be only of interest to anthropologists and historians.

But anyone who thought that then has been roundly – even brutally - corrected now. Fifty years on, religion has made an astonishing – and some might understandably say – terrifying – return (sadly, in some cases, with a vengeance). No well-educated person for the 21st century can afford to not know what the world's religions hold dear, when their most activating and motivating times are, how they can be represented and misrepresented and so on.



And if Ninian's enthusiastic commitment now is incontrovertibly vindicated, so too is that of his successor in the role and his associate in the development of the Working Party in its early years.

Geoffrey Parrinder was our 2nd President. Though the S and the P of Shap did not come from Smart and Parrinder, they might as well have done since Geoffrey and Ninian so utterly bookended the thinking and direction of Shap.

My memories of Geoffrey are limited but I certainly remember him as almost patrician, at least in appearance, but he was much more down to earth once met. It was his key resolution that formed the Working Party out of that gathering in Shap and he first steered and then advised Shap through its golden years. If Ninian fizzed, Geoffrey burned, driving things forward with resolution and clarity, warm fellowship and considerable patience. He never stopped caring for Shap and attending our meetings until near the end of his life, playing first a leading, then a modest but committed, part till he could no longer.

And now me! Well, I've learnt that patience is an essential skill! Though I've been Chair on three separate occasions, I've been trying to close down Shap for the last few years and have only now achieved it. I've also learnt that it is dangerous to fail to attend meetings when things like appointing a president might be on the agenda!

But what kind of suicidal death-wish leads a group to choose as its third and final President the man whose stated aim it is to bring about its demise?

Actually, of course, we know it's not that. Though many in Shap are visionary and many more are dogged and all are idealists in one form or another, we are also well plugged in and realists. We know that Shap's mission, that used to be marginal, radical and resisted by most, is now mainstream, adopted into law and resisted by only an increasingly irrelevant fringe. Others have also taken up cudgels on behalf of the fundamental intention of Shap – that Religious Education should require a broad and inclusive sweep, treating each religion with respect in its own terms and resisting assumptions about seeking to change students' stances, while still driving them to review their attitudes.

So I think we all accept, with varying numbers and lengths of backward glances, that this is the time to close. Our heads held high, with rightful pride in all that Shap has achieved over half a century, the very fact that we are not really any longer seen as trailblazers is proof enough of our success.



But the task is not finished and the mission is not utterly concluded. There are still at least three aspects of RE and RS that Shap stands for that have not been taken up with the enthusiasm and commitment that we might have hoped for.

First comes the interplay between academics and practitioners in the classroom. Shap always wanted a mix of both, each informing the other and thus raising everybody's game. The endless pressing in of horizons in recent years both in terms of employment conditions and educational ambition on the part of 'the system' has made that aspiration harder and harder to maintain, so that even getting classroom teachers to join us to inform our conversation has proved inordinately difficult in recent years.

Second is the conviction that learning about religion is not merely a byway of human knowledge but a lynchpin. All sorts of educational policies have worked against that and we are bound to applaud the REC in particular for keeping the pressure up on this, albeit to little avail so far.

And thirdly, is the need for good, accurate information. It is with pride that we salute and encourage Peter Woodward and the calendar team as they continue to take the Calendar forward. It was, and remains, the only truly reliable source of the information it contains. But beyond that, my goodness! Anyone who has had to review textbooks for RE will know what a woefully inadequate grasp of the basic facts, let alone anything more sophisticated, is considered acceptable out there. To call it the blind leading the blind is offensive to the sensitivity of most of those suffering visual impairment. This is the ignorant leading the desperate in many cases and huge amounts of misinformation float around out there with no-one to correct it.

These then remain tasks for those who care about the field of RE and RS but they are no longer for us as a group. We are no longer the people to lead this still essential fight. Shap has reached the end of a fifty year road and now closes. It falls to me, the one mortal amongst the Presidents of Shap, to deal the mortal blow and declare our end.

But like Camelot, though we no longer will stand, we existed. We inspired and we did what we did. Let us hope that the vision we embodied, the publications we created, the students we taught, the seminars we ran, the teachers we trained, the memories and echoes of our work, inform and influence long into the future for the benefit of human knowledge and understanding.

Clive A Lawton

President 2017 - 2019