



## 07 Shap's Initial Aims and Current Achievements

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Shap was never formally ideological, but the members of the Working Party shared a common ambition. We wanted to broaden the basis of English education by reference to the world's religious traditions. There was a deficit condition for the study of religion and religions in the English educational system – and this extended to the rest of the UK and continental Europe. Shap wasn't anti-Christian, but it recognised that the prevailing position in education was unfair, globally stunting, and self-defeating even for Christianity itself.

Shap's very earliest aims arising from the 1969 conference were:

1. To identify the practical problems at various educational levels involved in teaching about world religions
2. To study and provide relevant teaching material
3. To generate new ideas, to explore the possibilities of future conferences and in-service training courses for teachers
4. To act as a clearing house for information on visual aids, books, conferences or working parties on related topics.<sup>1</sup>

These have remained, adapted and elaborated according to changing needs and opportunities.

Academic and professional inclusivity has been a given. The working group from the conference comprised 'three university teachers in comparative religion, seven lecturers in education and nine teachers'. This brought together colleagues from primary and secondary schools, colleges of education and universities – not a common experience either fifty years ago or now, especially when infant school presence was ensured.

Inclusivity didn't end there however. There was a determination to extend across a full range of religious and belief traditions, and this was achieved from individual specialists in higher education or of personal standing within a particular religious tradition. No-one was invited to become a member in any

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<sup>1</sup> John R Hinnells (ed) *Comparative Religion in Education: A Collection of Studies* Oriel Press 1910 p109. The clearing house notion was greatly assisted by work undertaken by Peter Woodward at Borough Road College.



representative organisational capacity<sup>2</sup>. By that means the CofE and RC versions of Christianity were covered, and so too were Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. And so too was Humanism in the person of Harold Blackham.

Appreciation of the intrinsic wealth and diversity of religious experience was another feature fundamental for Shap – genuinely multi-dimensional and variously expressed. Religions could not be reduced to a common core. Not all believe in God. Belief is a given, but what is believed is massively diverse on such matters as human perfectibility, the need or otherwise for an interventionist saviour, and post mortem prospects. Many have sacred texts, but the nature of the Revelation/Enlightenment is internally debated and externally contested between them. All have tales to tell, but there's variation over whether the telling matters as much as or even more than their historicity. Artistic expression in musical and visual forms is often strikingly vivid, but sometimes taboo. Religions all engage in performative rituals, but diversely so – celebratory moments in personal daily routines, family rhythms and/or annual festivities – and they have some degree of organisational structure, but this may or may not be hierarchical. Whilst all take individual experience as a given, some promote its mystic nature more than do others. And though moral sense matters universally, there are differences in how this is articulated. This wealth of diversity is what was behind talk of 'phenomenology' and Ninian's six or seven dimensions of religion. It certainly was the opposite of the version that characterised the Shap agenda as one of superficial commodification.

The challenge to overcome the knowledge-deficit in the world's religious traditions on the part of those teaching RE was addressed in publications and conferences. These deliberately included both high level subject matter on particular aspects of individual religions and worked out strategies and work-schemes for classroom implementation across the full school age range. Attention to Christianity followed on after that given to the other religions, not because it was inherently undervalued, but because experience suggested that

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of each current HMI with national responsibility for the subject – but they were invited as individuals and not as full members.

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teachers in primary and secondary schools found that the presence of children from other religious backgrounds exposed the inadequacies as teachers of their relevant understanding of any other tradition. It was also the case that any preparatory academic and professional study in colleges or universities, however adequate or otherwise, would have been predominantly rooted in the Christian traditions. Shap acted as a quality monitor of its own and others' resources – this was all the more vital since these resources would in effect be providing the bridges into less familiar territory for teachers and professional tutors at every level.

No ceiling was set on the number of SWP members. In the interest of comprehending the full range of its interests, it grew into the upper 20s - more was considered unwieldy. This, together with a decision not to duplicate, meant that many highly eligible colleagues were never invited to join. An unintended side effect of this was that SWP was sometimes perceived as a self-perpetuating private club. That false impression was continually exposed by the continuing policy of openness on the part of Shap members individually and overall readiness to collaborate with other organisations wherever appropriate.

Individual WP members have usually worn several hats – employing institution, academic and/or professional association(s), faith community base, authoring, photography – and their engagements weren't concealed or compartmentalised one from another. The existence of other relevant players in the field was always seen as an opportunity for collaboration rather than polarising competition. Thus, the Community Relations Commission and Commission for Racial Equality were desirable partners for joint publication of Resource Handbooks, as was CEM 's *Learning for Living* for dedicated representation of material from conferences on particular religions. The Standing Conference on Inter Faith Dialogue in Education (SCIFDE) and its successor Inter Faith Network for the UK were natural partners in the compilation and ever widening circulation of the Calendar of Religious Festivals. From its role as a founder member of the RE Council of England and Wales in 1973, Shap continually pressed the argument for inclusivity with its fellow member organisations. And the CofE proved to be a significant – and



controversial - enabler of Shap endeavours through hosting Shap conferences at its colleges in Chichester, Lancaster and York and for many years serving as hosting and distribution centre, first at Church House Westminster and then the Causton Street RE Centre and finally London Diocesan offices.

Although it would be presumptuous to overclaim the influence of Shap on another organisation, it's hard to deny the extent of mutual engagement between Shap and the Schools Council in the 1970s. Ninian was Director of the Lancaster based Schools Council Secondary and Primary Projects, Donald Horder was Deputy Director, Mary Hayward was a Secondary Project Officer and Heather Moore a Primary one. Beginning with Working Paper 36 their impact both within the UK and in many other countries was enormous. More modest, but in the same vein of collaborative interest a decade later was the Shap members' authoring of the *Religious Studies GCSE Glossary of Terms* for the REC Council and the Secondary Exam Council.

A more recent example of Shap's attestation to quality of learning resources being expressed in a government funded research project came in 2009-10. As part of its ongoing partnership with the RE Council, the then Department for Children, Schools and Families agreed a project to investigate *Materials used to Teach about World Religions in Schools in England*. The contract to carry it out was deservedly given to the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit. Bob Jackson, Mary Hayward, and Paul Hopkins were among its key researchers. It confirmed that quality issues persist, both in accuracy of knowledge of religions and the degree of imaginative challenge.

A different, and perhaps less well recognised strand of Shap's interest has been in audio-visual expression. It's been there in the photographic productions of Bury Peerless and David Rose, the BBC Schools Radio programme, the ATV/CTV television programmes and the BBC RE INSET programmes developed respectively by Bob, Peter and myself. It's been there in the video recordings by Roy Pitcher of live class teaching of RE themes. And quintessentially it's demonstrated in Ninian's *Long Search* BBC TV series, as in the Shap website developments, which include Roger's Audio Glossary and Paul's facilitation of the online access to the Calendar with the full-colour wall chart and photos.





Shap's ambition that its priorities might be successfully developed beyond England met with mixed results. Our initiative to penetrate in curriculum terms to Northern Ireland was overcome by local resistance, but it did lead to the happy appointment of John Greer to the staff of the new university of Ulster in Coleraine. Even now its aims seem far more likely to be achievable in the Republic than in the North. The hopes of developing a Scottish Shap Working Party gained some momentum through Stewart Sutherland; it ran out of steam, but in individual terms Frank Whaling's long-term membership of Shap ensured that there was two-way north-south interaction.

Even further beyond, Ninian started to think in terms first of a North American Shap and then even of World Shap, but political constraints got in the way. In Continental Europe however, thanks principally to the efforts of Herbert Schultze, there was EAWRE – the European Association for World Religions in Education – or most simply, EuroShap. From his base at the Comenius Institute, Herbert was in touch, especially via Lutheran circuits, with parallel developments in other countries<sup>3</sup> but he also encouraged direct collaboration with Shap. He invited a sub-group of Shap members as main presenters at a conference on World Religions in Education and subsequently over a twenty-year period he convened regular EAWRE meetings across Western Europe, in such locations as Amsterdam, Crete, Geneva, Hanover, Lancaster and Strasburg. For some time, there was an EAWRE tri-lingual version of the Shap Calendar, there was a proposal for a European Teaching Passport for World Religions, and an application to Brussels for funding – which never materialised. Herbert himself was an inveterate member of Shap, but following his death EAWRE ceased to convene. Happily, Shap-related interests find expression in EFTRE (European Forum for Teachers of RE) in the persons of Lesley and Paul and in COGREE (Co-ordinating Group for RE in Europe) through Peter Schreiner. Above all has been the breakthrough represented by the *Toledo Guiding Principles*, published by the OSCE in 2007 as guidance for governments in making provision for the study and knowledge about religions

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<sup>3</sup> Cf his jointly produced 'Teaching of World Religions in Continental Europe' in *Freedom and Authority in Religions and Religious Education* Cassell 1996, ch 17.



and beliefs in schools<sup>4</sup>. Bob's part in this, in subsequent endorsements by the European Council of Ministers, and in the REDCo Project<sup>5</sup> is testimony to the advancement of the Shap aims.

Looking back, there were two particular areas of potential development which never advanced in take-up as we hoped. One was the extension into other professional areas besides school education – especially health and social care. Seed corn money was set aside to promote this from Chichester, but it never fruited, except perhaps in the example of Erica Brown's hospice related applications. However, the Calendar continues to find its way into prisons, hospital and university intranets, and the offices of social service providers. The other was the extension of RS examination work so that the increasing popularity of Ethics and Philosophy, especially at A Level, would become less dominated by a Western frame of reference.

The current frustrations for Shap are of a different order and arise from the shrinkage in government recognition of the strategic importance of RE. The wilful exclusion of it from the Baccalaureate at 16+ has been directly destructive of numbers of pupils studying the subject for GCSE and AS + A Levels, with knock-on effect on staffing. The annual number of specialist secondary students for RE is in decline, more so than virtually any other subject, and is therefore further diminishing the already patchy specialist knowledge base amongst teachers. Primary students have thinner grounding in RE than for fifty years. And then there are side effects from other general policy shifts. For instance, the dismantling of Local Education Authorities and reduction in LA funding has all but eliminated RE from the education advisory services, or the recasting of universities as competitive businesses, 'owning' staff time and energy in ways that preclude any related voluntary work and favour larger institutions in recruitment discretion. None of this is good news. And yet, there is reasonable hope that what Shap stands for will one day re-emerge beyond the constraints of Austerity and Brexit.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true> Published by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

<sup>5</sup> Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries. The countries involved in the Euro-funded consortium were England & Wales, Estonia, France, Germany, Holland and Russia.

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**Afterword** It's perhaps easy from within SWP membership to overrate our significance. There are many other players – both individual and organisational which have also contributed to the development of an inclusive approach to religious traditions in the curriculum and greater attention to religion and belief as a global reality in human civilisations. That said, there is no doubt that the focussed energy which Shap has brought to these priorities has served to speed their practical realisation. They are now integral givens in academic and professional judgement. The Shap Website will continue as a freely informative treasure trove and the Calendar of Religious Festivals as the authoritative and annually renewed source for education and social services in their entirety.

Brian Gates