

The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



Wendy Dossett



How did I come to join the Working Party?

I was nominated in 1999 by Peggy Morgan. As a Religious Studies academic who had previously trained as an RE Teacher and had been the Director of the Religious Education Resources Centre at what was then Trinity College, Carmarthen, I knew of and deeply admired Shap's work. Having left school just before the new vision for RE was enshrined in the 1988 ERA, my own experience of RE had been lacking. I had taught myself to get an O level RS as there was no class in my school. By the time I had graduated with my BA in RS and English Literature, used the work of Ninian Smart and Geoffrey Parrinder and others, I knew that Shap and its early members had been instrumental in bringing about the kind of multi-faith phenomenological RE that my younger siblings were by then taking at school. I had always known that I wanted to promote and defend academically rigorous, non-confessional RE, but I didn't know how. When Peggy nominated me to join Shap, I was truly overwhelmed. I felt I had way more to learn than I had to offer.

What are my richest memories of being a Shap Member?

For me, the treasured friendships have been the most important aspect of Shap. The role modelling and encouragement offered to me by Shap women: Peggy, Lesley, Mary Hayward, Deborah Weston, Ursula King, Eleanor Nesbitt, Marilyn Mason and others has impacted me personally and professionally in more ways than I can say. I have so many memories of different specific moments, it is hard to select, but a striking one I have is of a meeting in Birmingham attended by Frank Whaling in the early 2000s. Shap was trying to diversify at the time and was struggling with its sense of purpose. Frank (who didn't often attend) had

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come to the meeting already fired-up about the pressures on academic Religious Studies coming from cultural studies and some critical scholars within its own ranks. After listening to us for a while, he burst out with an extraordinarily inspiring, passionate, completely extemporaneous, speech, which for me (and I think for many others present) had the effect of bringing us back to Shap's original aims with immense clarity and urgency. It was one of those goosebumpy moments. I also remember experiencing paradigm shifts in my own thinking in conversations with Clive Erricker. I didn't always completely agree with him, but he taught me so much about narratives, power and children. Shap's own difficulties in finding a direction were indirectly formative for me, in the sense that they alerted me to the various arenas in which accurate knowledge of the religious, spiritual and secular landscape is crucial. My own development as a researcher in spirituality and addiction recovery owes much to the conversations Shap was having at the time I arrived on the scene.

What has been my major contribution to the work of Shap?

In 2004 I took on the role of Secretary, serving with various Chairs during the next decade, including Lesley Prior, Clive Lawton, David Rose and Roger Butler. Life in this role was greatly helped by Mike Berry's fantastic organisational skills. I joined the Calendar Group and took responsibility for Japanese and Chinese Religions, and, with Peggy and Lesley, was on the Shap Award committee for many years. Given all that has happened since then, it seems perhaps trivial to remember this, but in 2004, Lesley asked me to draft a letter from Shap to then QCA responding to the new National Framework and defending local determination. It was something I felt passionately about the time (and I still do, although the various changes in the education system since then, namely, academisation and the growth of the faith school sector, has sadly meant I've had to amend my view somewhat). I felt so proud to be tasked with speaking on behalf of this wonderful organisation. Shap is of course populated by expert lobbyists for whom this would have been no big deal, but to me it was immense. I could make a difference. That's how it felt at the time, at least. Whether it did make a difference is difficult to determine, which is true of much of Shap's work. However, it was the right thing to do, and I'm grateful to have had the chance to do it. Of all these activities, though, I most enjoyed the work of the Award committee. Not only did we get to explore, but also to reward some truly excellent resources, created by some brilliant people in our field. Peggy, Lesley and I were always struck by how humbled and grateful people were to be considered for the Award, which reassured us of Shap's ongoing status in the RE community. When Paul Hopkins came along and created the website, it was really great to see this work recorded and appearing properly in the public domain.

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