

The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



Brian Gates



In 1969 I was in my third year as a lecturer-researcher at University of London Goldsmiths College. Led by Dr Catherine Alder we were recasting our teaching priorities from what had been called a Divinity Department to a Religion Department (not Religious Studies) expressly attentive to other religious traditions in their own rights as well as to Christianity. I had registered for a part-time PhD at Lancaster University, supervised by Ninian Smart and this initially focussed on the philosophical rationale for Religion in public education. My academic exposure to religions globally had come not from my first degree in Theology here in the UK, but in the USA from post-graduate courses in the Comparative Ethics, History of Social Ethics, Natural Law, and Sociology of Religion. Now my exposure was more directly grounded from London schools. Anyway, I was grateful to be invited to join the Working Party.

Two features stand out for me from those early years. One was the richness of meeting with such a rich array of scholarship and professional experience. Exchanges were often sharp and critically challenging, but invariably productive. There was humour in abundance, especially from Ninian's ditties and doodles. For instance, there was a play on the word Shap to become an acronym for the founding co-chairs – Smart, Hilliard and Parrinder (with the 'S' sometimes becoming Sharpe and the 'H' Horder).

The other feature was the otherwise cold deserted setting for our overnight meetings in the Ifor Evans Hall in north London. Membership of the working party was self-funding and this



location along with the timing between Christmas and New Year was that which was most affordable and compatible with other commitments. We were ready to 'travel light'. The fact that this was accepted as a given is testimony to the sense of shared purpose we all felt. And at this point I should admit that the propensity to adjourn late evening to a local hostelry was not rare in Shap's experience.

Throughout the subsequent fifty years, Shap has featured continually within my working horizons. I have learned enormously from colleague members. What Shap has stood for will never be superfluous.

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