

The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



Richard Gombrich



My original contact with the Shap Working Party came through Chichester College of Further Education. A mature student called Sue Hamilton, who was in a stream which I suppose trained teachers of religious education, had greatly impressed her teacher Owen Cole, who himself was studying part-time at SOAS. Owen got to hear of me, and wrote to ask me if I would interview Sue, who seemed to be interested in Buddhism. This led to Sue's moving to Oxford, where she learnt Sanskrit and Pali, wrote a doctorate, and ended up publishing three excellent books on Buddhism, which are standing the test of time. (Sad to report, she has since died.) Owen must have spoken about me to his colleague John Rankin, who I think had some interest in Buddhism, and I believe it was John who invited me to my first Shap meeting, which was in Chichester (in 1980?). I immediately felt enthusiastic about Shap's mission of spreading accurate information concerning world religions into the British education system, and wanted to be part of it. Initially I think I was for a few years Shap's only expert on Buddhism, so my role was obvious.

I would single out two memories of Shap as great contributions to my life. The first is that while I liked nearly all my colleagues in Shap, I was particularly impressed by Hugo Gryn. A Reform rabbi, he had survived a Nazi concentration camp. I cannot tell what he was like before that, but his sufferings had only made him exceptionally kind, tolerant and humorous. I did not get to know him very well, but I still think of him as a model. I particularly enjoyed his relationship to Clive Lawton. Clive was an enthusiastic young



Orthodox rabbi (later also a school headmaster) who stood at the other pole of Judaism. He could be quite fiery and sometimes a row seemed imminent, but Hugo had a magical touch to gain agreement and good humour.

My other memory is of an evening when a group of us visited the mosque at Brick Lane to learn from the Imam, a sweet old Bangladeshi who had come to London in the war and stayed on. The main thing he conveyed to us was his dismay at the decadence of our society. What I found fascinating was that what clearly epitomised it for him was that women and girls showed their legs; he told us he had had to have curtains put over his television set. No one has done more to give me an insight into Muslim values.

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