



Obituary – Vida Barnett

The name of Vida Barnett is linked inexorably with Ethel Wormald College in Liverpool, with the Christian Education Movement whose conferences she attended regularly, with Shap as Education Officer, and as pioneer of a wide range of practical approaches to Religious Education for children of all ages, but especially in the primary years.

Vida travelled extensively, always looking for material that would allow her to enrich the descriptions she brought back to enliven her teaching, whether in school or college. She was widely respected by Muslims, Sikhs and Jews, and visited Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco in her search for the heart of Islam; India and the Punjab, where her insights into the spirituality of the Sikh pilgrims she met entranced Sikh members of the audiences at in-service courses (held in gurdwaras); and Israel on at least three occasions, where among more orthodox encounters she visited the two Samaritan communities at Holon and Nablus/Mount Hebron, sharing in their celebration of Pesach on top of the mountain. It was in Israel that she also received the ultimate compliment from the imam of the tomb of John the Baptist of being 'Musleem', even though not 'a Muslim'. She also spent time in Istanbul on a Shap linked course on 'Islam in its Turkish context', Dubrovnik, where she was warmly welcomed into a synagogue and came away with precious memorabilia, and three famous cities in Spain, rich in Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions.

The fruit of her travels was evident in her role as joint editor of the Shap Journal from 1987 to 1994, to which she herself contributed eighteen perceptive articles, (eg Teaching by Touching in the Primary School — 'I've £50 to spend!') and in her development of Shap courses for primary teachers in the north of England and inspired input into courses in world religions in the Midlands. She read widely and specialised in collecting novels with insights into different faiths and beliefs. She pioneered the development of 'feely' boxes for children to learn through touch as well as sight, and collected an amazingly wide range of artefacts for use in evoking insights into the spirituality of daily life.

Vida had endless patience and generosity for those seeking help, though less for the pomposity of fools and those who showed cruelty to animals. She suffered badly from migraine and arthritis through most of her life, but perhaps because of this she had the knack of inspiring self-confidence in others and encouraging her students to experiment in being self-reliant and creative. She was an amazing person, inspired in many ways by her Humanist husband, Bert Barnett, but more than this a first class pioneer of 'open' RE. The insights she received herself she passed on to others in an unforgettable style that was all her own.

Peter Woodward