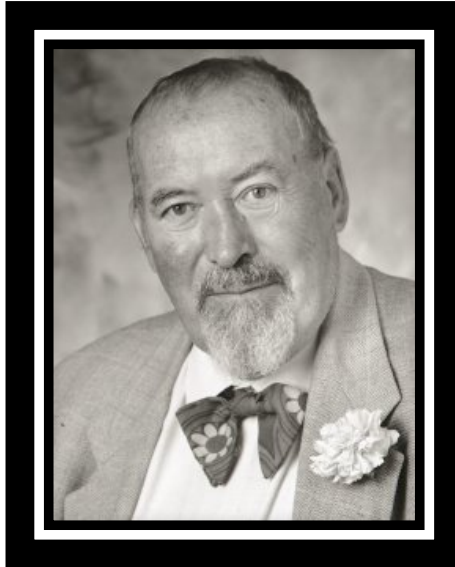




Ninian Smart 1927-2001



Shap Journal 2001 Editorial – Mary Hayward and Alan Brown

The death of Ninian Smart, the President of SHAP, in January 2001, came as a shock for Ninian had an aura of eternity about him. Some members of the Working Party knew him well, others had never met him; but to all those with whom he worked and met he was an inspiration and a source of encouragement. Ninian was a founder and creator of SHAP and a constant support — full of imagination, humour and vision. An obituary and other tributes to him are included elsewhere in the Journal.

OBITUARY

Professor Ninian Smart

Ninian Smart died on 29th January, 2001. He is sorely missed by not only his family but by many students and friends who came to know him over a period of almost forty years. His death is all the more poignant as it came only days after he and Libushka had come back to enjoy retirement in Lancaster.

In 1967 the University of Lancaster advertised the post of professor of Religious Studies stating that candidates might be of any faith or none. This was an immediate cause for discussion and shock waves rippled about the usually quiet pond of theology for many months. The man appointed was a Scot and an Episcopalian, Ninian Smart. He began assembling a team of colleagues who shared his broad, and to many people then, unusual view of the subject. It was still customary for the discipline to be theology with the emphasis upon the Christian tradition. 'Secular Education and the Logic of Religion', published in 1968,



informed educationalists of Ninian's interest in what was being taught in schools and contained insights, which were to give direction to Religious Education for the next decade and beyond.

In 1969 John Hinnells, then of Newcastle University, organised a conference on teaching world religions in school, held at Shap Wells Hotel on the edge of the Lake District. Out of this came the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. Shap is not an acronym based on Smart, Hilliard, or Hinnells, and Parrinder, as has sometimes been suggested, it was merely the name of the place where the Working Party was formed. Ninian was one of the speakers at the conference and, together with Geoffrey Parrinder encouraged the formation of the Working Party and became its first (co) chairman. From that time onwards he always took a close interest in its activities in keeping with his already expressed interest in the teaching of RE in schools.

Lancaster was the obvious choice when the Government set up the Schools' Council Project on Secondary RE. One of its most important publications was the School's Council Working Paper 36. Although such documents appeared anonymously there can be little doubt that the thoughts expressed in it were Ninian's. It must remain one of the most important documents in the history of RE. Whenever I have had what I thought, (and hoped!), was an original idea, when I consulted the Working Paper, I invariably found that it was already there. It came as no surprise when it was decided that the Schools Council Project on Religious Education in Primary Schools should also be Lancaster based. These projects not only had a great influence in Britain, they also informed and moulded the work of teachers in such countries as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. It might be remembered that it was about this time that those who would abolish RE were most vociferous, therefore the insights of Professor Smart were most timely. His success in persuading teachers and local authorities, and Christian denominational bodies, to replace what was really a mainly biblical study of Christianity, by an open exploration of world views, including Christianity in all its dimensions, must have made an appreciable contribution to saving a subject which was becoming increasingly dependent on the Establishment, especially in Parliament, for its survival. It is also to his credit that after the first Shap conference the famous Humanist, Harold Blackham, felt able to join the Working Party. It is a matter of regret that non-religious world views were not included in Agreed Syllabuses and specifically excluded from the proposed Birmingham syllabus of 1976. Only recently has it become an accepted fact, though not universally so, that the study of religion cannot be truly open if non-religious stances for living are not treated with similar seriousness.

In 1977 'The Long Search', an important television series, was first transmitted. This brought Ninian Smart to the notice of many viewers who had not previously heard of him; nor were they aware of the wide sweep of religions which it covered. He was one of the pioneers in showing how religions might be successfully presented to a wide public.



From Lancaster Ninian went to Santa Barbara where he spent most of the last twenty years. His links with Lancaster and the Working Party remained. He attended its meetings whenever he was in the UK and frequently corresponded with its officers and members. The USA could not contain him. In addition to being visiting professor at Yale, Wisconsin and Princeton, he held similar posts at Varanasi, Bangalore, Queensland, Otago, and Hong Kong.

His writings were numerous and varied in subject matter. It may surprise some people that he, a Scot, might write on the aesthetics of cricket, but it should be remembered that Len Hutton came from a Scottish family which migrated to Yorkshire! His academic work influenced a generation of students and teachers just as personal contact with him did, but it will be for the flower which he always wore in his button hole, the sharpness of his mind, his wit and humour, his wisdom, and, perhaps above all, for his kindness and generosity, that those who had the privilege of knowing him will remember Ninian Smart.

Ninian came from an academic home, his father and two brothers all being professors. Like all true scholars, however, he wore his learning lightly, having time to give generous help to all who asked it of him.

To all his family, but especially to his wife Libushka and their children, the members of Shap send their condolences.

Ninian Smart was born 6th May 1927 and died 29th January 2001.

W Owen Cole

An appreciation of Ninian

RC. Zaehner once asked me to interpret for him, when we were going to hear a paper read by Ninian Smart. As a matter of fact, I always found Ninian's spoken words easier than the written. His open and friendly personality helped in understanding the most intricate Indian or Chinese religions and philosophical concepts. We met first at King's College in London, and then at the SHAP Wells Hotel in Cumbria at the first conference where the most famous Shap approach to the study of world religions was initiated. Ninian's move to Birmingham and then to Lancaster gave him wider opportunities and we envied the administrative and financial support that he was given to build up an outstanding northern centre, with linguistic, theological and philosophical experts. The new University of Lancaster became as famous for the study of religions as for any other discipline and in all of this Ninian was at the centre, both academically and personally. His department and his home welcomed those of us who were new to the northern universities. Ninian's linguistic abilities and his philosophical interests, not to mention his 'pisky' (Scottish Episcopalian) church background,



made an outstanding combination, so necessary in the study of a complex subject like religion. In British, American and other international circles Ninian's friendship as much as his learning were of unique importance, and we miss his departure from the stage at a relatively young age.

Geoffrey Parrinder, May 2001

Ninian —A reminiscence

In 1969 I was appointed Principal Lecturer and Head of Religious Studies at Bishop Otter College, Chichester. For many of us the 1960s was a turbulent decade. It was also exciting and somehow full of promise. One felt things were changing and a brighter, more peaceful future lay ahead. Some of us however were a little too set in our ways to be "going to San Francisco", remembering "to put a flower in our hair"! For those of us who did our theological studies in the forties and fifties, the intellectual explosions of the sixties tested our adaptability, not to say our sanity! If that were not enough, the whole basis of the rationale for Religious Education was being seriously challenged! Ninian's first published contribution to that debate was "Secular Education and the Logic of Religion" (1968). As far as I could see, none of this had penetrated Bishop Otter College!

So as a preparation to taking up my post, to help sort out in my mind what I wanted to achieve, I wrote to Professor Ninian Smart at Lancaster and asked if I might come and see him. Not only did he consent to see me, but he gave me a whole day of his time during which we discussed at length the whole basis of the very innovative Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster and his view of Religious Education in schools. In professional terms it was the most important seminar in my life, and it was conducted as between equals. Ninian never talked down to you. He always made you feel that your contribution to the dialogue was worth while. I found an immediate rapport — helped by finding that, like myself he was a Scottish Episcopalian. (Thus also supporting the view that religion and cultural identity are inextricably mixed!)

Ninian once said, at a time when definitions of religion were being hotly (and often fruitlessly) debated, "Whatever religion is, there's a lot of it about!" He used a descriptive formula in defining religion rather than trying to extract an essence "sui generis" (as the scholars say). It was his original "Six Dimensions" which became for many the tools for organising teaching in school and for me the most exciting insight was on the role of Myth in religion.

We met again on many other occasions — especially at Shap Conferences initially at the Shap Wells Hotel. Ninian was a very sociable person and great raconteur and when the work was over he shared the company in the bar. He brought a great good sense of humour to



these occasions. I always admired his capacity to “see into” things. Every meeting with him brought to me some little nugget of unusual insight, some new slant to my understanding.

Yet for all the outward appearance of objective study, Ninian was more than an academic. He liked people and he believed that the understanding of people’s religion was the key to understanding them and being able to work in harmony with them. Latterly he assimilated religions into the concept of “World Views”, by which he meant the ways people interpreted the meaning of life.

Although in recent years I saw little of him because he was always in some other place, such as California or Australia, I miss him very much and am sad to think that his great human understanding and intellectual perception is no longer available. Most of all I miss his ready and generous friendship.

John Rankin

Remembering Ninian

My first contact with Ninian Smart was by letter. When I lived in India more than 30 years ago I applied, in 1969 I think, for an advertised position in the Lancaster Religious Studies Department. I still remember the kind personal note from Ninian saying that there had been strong competition at senior level, but that they had much appreciated my application (Eric Sharpe was appointed then). Little was I to know then how often our paths would cross during many years to come, until his death on January 29, 2001.

Once back in Britain, we usually met once, twice or three times a year at annual conferences and meetings, whether at the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), the Shap Working Party, the Sociology of Religion Study Group, the Indian Religions Symposium, the London Society of Religion, and later the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). There were other international meetings, such as the Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) which I first attended in 1975 when it was held in Lancaster. There I also met Ninian’s wife Libushka for the first time, followed by many other meetings, whether in Lancaster or later at the AAR. I also taught one of their daughters in the 19 70s, when she took a Religious Studies degree at the University of Leeds.

I remember another meeting around that time in Cambridge, when Ninian told me about feminist developments in California and advised me jokingly that it was about time I should be part of these. Knowing full well that this was not a field he was into, I replied that I had been quietly busy with these matters for a long time already. He just said: “Oh yes, those quiet people are the most dangerous of all...”

The **Shap** working party on World Religions in Education



I worked closely with Ninian first as Secretary and then President of the BASR, of which he had been President before me. In 1994 we celebrated the 40th BASR anniversary conference in Bristol and several previous presidents took part, including Ninian. I shall never forget that he arrived from abroad with a strong toothache and urgently needed a dentist. I drove him to my dentist two or three times, and he was most grateful, expressing his appreciation by giving me a large flowering orchid plant which stood for many years in the corner of my sitting room, reminding me of his visit. Libushka, who had been told all this, could still remember the incident on the day of his funeral.

More recently, I contributed an essay together with many others to the book published in Ninian's honour by Christopher Lamb and Dan Cohn-Sherbook, *The Future of Religion — Post Modern Perspectives* (London: Middlesex University Press, 1999 — ISBN 1898253269). I was very touched when Ninian sent me last summer a lovely handwritten "thank you" note from his Italian holiday — a memento kept in my copy of the book.

Our last meeting was during the AAR in Nashville, in November 2000, during Ninian's presidency, celebrated with much aplomb. A very memorable occasion and the last time I saw him alive, as did many others of his friends and colleagues. We agreed that he, Libushka, and I would meet during my January visit to Lancaster — and we did, but under very different circumstances than we had imagined. I was travelling up by train from Bristol on the morning of January 29 to read a paper "Is there a future for Religious Studies as we know it?" to the departmental seminar, and the arrangement was that Ninian and I would meet for coffee the next morning. When I arrived at Lancaster station at two o'clock I was greeted with the terrible news that Ninian had had a massive stroke and just died. So we went straight to hospital to be with his family and say good-bye to dear Ninian who simply just looked asleep. It was so hard to accept that there was no more life in him and no more meeting beyond his committal to the grave a week later.

He loved flowers, I was told, and so we took flowers to his wife and family for the intimate evening wake, where those of us present felt like part of a much, much larger family surrounding a close, cherished friend. There were masses of flowers from an even larger group of people during his burial in the wind- and rain-swept Lancashire countryside. So many memories that will be with me until the end of my life of a greatly loved and valued friend, colleague and mentor, but as he, with his generosity of spirit and ever present kindness, would be the first to say, we have to carry on with our tasks rather than be downcast. That is the spirit in which he lived, and that is exactly what we did in Lancaster by holding the seminar as planned. Yes, there is a future for Religious Studies beyond Ninian, but it will be quite different without him, and he will be greatly missed by a great many people for a long time to come.

Ursula **King**, University of Bristol