



## Geoffrey Parrinder 1910 – 2005

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### Memories We Treasure

#### A Tribute to Professor Geoffrey Parrinder

(30 April 1910 – 16 June 2005)

Geoffrey Parrinder will be fondly remembered as a friend, colleague, mentor, distinguished scholar, a loving human being with a wonderful family. A towering academic figure with an impressive career, he remained always humble, gentle and kind. He was never arrogant or overbearing, even though physically so tall, walking erect well into his nineties.

Remembering his gaunt figure with its energetic forward stride, the twinkle in his eye, the infectious, guileless smile come first to mind, then the raconteur with his witty remarks, always an amusing anecdote to hand, an amazing story from his long life richly textured by so many encounters and experiences. He could conduct a serious thought-provoking conversation or just indulge in some gossip about the latest publication or appointments, some comments about his recent reading, whether religion, literature, current affairs or whatever else caught his imagination.

Geoffrey died peacefully at home in his sleep on June 16, at 7 pm in the evening, and I am writing these lines on July 4, after attending his funeral service this afternoon at Orpington Methodist Church, where he and his wife Mary worshipped for more than forty years. It was a service of thanksgiving for a life of many blessings, a life richly lived with and for others almost until its very end. It was a service of praise and celebration which honoured a truly great and good man, blessed with a sense of abundance and a love of life, a man of learning, a man of family and many friends from many lands, whose service fittingly concluded with Charles Wesley's hymn 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'.

His rich professional career and wide-ranging experience are all too evident in the long entry on 'Prof. (Edward) Geoffrey (Simons) Parrinder' in *Who's Who 2005* (pp. 1714-1715), giving us just the skeleton outline of dates, degrees, distinctions, professional positions and associations as well as his numerous publications, many of which are still in print. Personal testimonies to Geoffrey as friend, teacher and colleague by Professor John Hinnells, Professor Maurice Wiles (who predeceased Geoffrey on June 3, 2005) and Professor John Ferguson (who died in 1989), are found in the *Festschrift* I edited for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, *Turning Points in Religious Studies* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1990), to which several readers of this Journal made important contributions. This is still in print, but by far the most detailed account and critical assessment of 'Parrinder's Life and Career' is given in Martin Forward's book *A Bag of Needments. Geoffrey Parrinder and The Study of Religion* (Peter

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Lang, Bern, 1998; see chp. 1) which, like the earlier Festschrift, contains a bibliography of Geoffrey's writing that still needs supplementing since it ends in 1994.

Different people will remember Geoffrey for different reasons, having met him in different circumstances and at different times in his life. My own account needs to be expanded by the narratives of many others. I last saw Geoffrey alive on May 18, just one month before his death, when my husband and I paid a visit to Geoffrey and Mary in their Orpington home when both of them seemed very frail and diminished in comparison with a year earlier when I had last seen them. I shall never forget that beautiful, sunny May day with its ideal gardening weather, which he so much loved, the brief exchange of greetings, smiles and good wishes, a warm handshake and gentle nod of his head. All too aware that this was probably a final farewell, I was still caught by surprise that his end came so soon.

Memory strands reveal themselves with varying intensity and can be read in multiple ways to capture something of a person's depth of life. I rely on others' accounts as well as on some of my own memories to convey just a little of Geoffrey as a human being and family man, Geoffrey as a Methodist, Geoffrey as an academic teacher and scholar, and Geoffrey's importance for Shap. These are not separate strands in his life but were always closely interwoven and influenced each other.

To begin with Geoffrey the man, his son mentioned in his moving, personal address during the service that the family was proud that their father had risen from a rail booking clerk at Leigh-on-Sea (where Geoffrey went to school until 16 and worked at the station for 2 ½ years) to a well-known professor with three doctorates (two from the University of London, one honorary doctorate from Lancaster University)! During his time of working at the railway, Geoffrey qualified as a local preacher and then, between 1929-1932, trained for the Wesleyan Methodist ministry at Richmond College in London. He also met his future wife Mary, a nurse at the Royal Free Hospital, at the King's Cross Central Methodist Mission, during this period. They could only marry much later, in 1936, since British Methodism prescribed a seven-year engagement for its ordinands then, and soon they had one daughter and two sons.

Geoffrey and Mary were devoted to each other during the 69 eventful years of their married life and cared for many other people, whether family, friends or parishioners. No one could laugh as infectiously as her mother, their daughter said, indicating that the whole family all shared the same sense of fun and enjoyment. When asked some time ago how they had managed all these years of being happily married without any rows, they both answered as with one voice: 'None of your business'. This story was related to us by the preacher during the service.

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Geoffrey loved talking, and talked with great eloquence; he loved reading and writing, even writing the odd verse (he and Ninian Smart exchanged poems for Geoffrey's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday). He officially listed 'travel, gardening, literature as recreation' as his hobbies in *Who's Who*. He was a great traveller, going to many parts of Africa, first as a missionary and then as a university teacher, and later also to India, Australia, Japan and North America, where he attended many conferences and gave lectures, apart from travelling on holidays around different parts of Europe. He had a tremendous zest for life, much energy and curiosity, and always a project on the go. No wonder that he was active as a scholar into his early nineties and outlived many others, so that he could write about Ninian's death at 73 'we miss his departure from the stage at a relatively young age' (SHAP Journal 2001/2002).

Methodists will no doubt pay their own tribute to one of their great scholars of international renown, one of the leading figures in the comparative study of religion. It was Methodism that made Geoffrey what he was; it provided him with his initial vocation as a missionary and minister; it launched him on his career by giving him his theological education and by sending him to Africa, where he worked on and off for 19 years. Methodism gave him his strong Christian faith and fellowship that remained with him until the end. His career as a Methodist minister and missionary lasted from 1933-1946, in what is now Benin and the Ivory Coast. This experience in French West Africa led to his comparative study of African religion in the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, in Dahomey and Nigeria, submitted for his London PhD (examined by E. O. James and Edwin Smith) and later published as his first book, *West African Religion* (1949).

From 1946-1949 Geoffrey worked as a minister of the Guernsey French circuit in the Channel Isles while also studying for a London MA and MTh in the history and philosophy of religion. In 1949, he was appointed to the new Department of Religious Studies at University College Ibadan, Nigeria, the first department ever to be so called, later followed by many others in Britain. This was the beginning of his academic career and the end of his work as a Methodist missionary and minister, although he continued to take occasional services and perform weddings and other functions for friends and his local church for the rest of his life.

Geoffrey worked as a Lecturer in Religious Studies from 1949-1950, and as a Senior Lecturer from 1950-1958 in Ibadan where he made many friends and also met some future colleagues. The setting up of the department and some of its courses were highly innovative at that time. Professor Andrew Walls, who co-edited a special number of *Religion* for Geoffrey's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1980, wrote that 'Geoffrey Parrinder found himself teaching what no-one had ever taught him – what, perhaps no-one had ever taught at university level before: a course in Indigenous Religious Beliefs of West Africa (*Religion* 10/2: 144).



Geoffrey also used this time to undertake more empirical research, published as *Religion in an African City* (1953), for which he gained his London DD.

E.O James encouraged Parrinder to apply for the new post of Reader in the Comparative Study of Religions at King's College, University of London, to which he was appointed in 1958. He was given a personal chair in 1970, made Dean of the Faculty of Theology from 1972-1974 and retired in 1977 after teaching, researching and supervising students' dissertations at King's College for 19 years. It is through his teaching, writing and radio talks that Geoffrey exercised a wide influence on students, teachers and a large general public. Many will remember his kind help and sound advice. Internationally the best known of his students is Archbishop Desmond Tutu whom he supervised for an MTh in the 1960s and who graciously provided the Foreword to Geoffrey's *Festschrift*. He also wrote to Geoffrey earlier this year after his son had informed him that Geoffrey was no longer able to travel and thus could not come to a meeting with Tutu at King's College to which he had been invited late last year.

My own meeting with Geoffrey dates from 1969, at a time I still lived in India. We both attended the memorable Guru Nanak Fifth Centenary conference at the University of Patiala, culminating in an extensive visit of several historical Sikh gurdwaras in the surrounding district. I well remember travelling with him for a whole day in an old Austin Morris around the dusty, bumpy lanes of the Punjab listening to his stories, learning about life at London University, and hearing about his family. We chatted and laughed a lot, an unforgettable encounter, which after my return to London made Geoffrey an obvious choice as my PhD supervisor (1972-1977) whilst I was working as a lecturer at the University of Leeds. When I turned up for the occasional tutorial in London, he took me for afternoon tea to his favourite Twinings Tea room in the Strand. He was always very supportive and encouraging, pressing me on to complete my PhD before his retirement in 1977. I may be one of his last doctoral students, but I have never checked this with him. Later he came to Leeds to examine some of my own research students, Owen Cole for example, or acted as external examiner with wisdom and discernment for our undergraduates. He was a colleague to be relied upon, and he became a good personal friend who sometimes talked about some of the difficulties and disappointments he had experienced in his own career, but never with malice or resentment.

Professionally we saw a lot of each other since Geoffrey was the Honorary Secretary (1960-1972) of what was then still the BAHF (now the BASR, the British Association for the Study of Religions) and subsequently its President (1972-1977); he was one of the founder members and was later made a Life Member of the BASR. He also introduced me to the London Society for the Study of Religion (LSSR), of which he was President from 1980-1982,



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and much earlier to Shap, of which he was also a founder member and later Co-President until 1987. Geoffrey had been a member of the London Society of Jews and Christians (LSJC) since 1963, which elected him as its President (1981-1990) and made him an Honorary Life President in 1990. His international renown was well established through his numerous books and their translations into other languages, the many invitations he received to give special lectures, such as the Charles Strong Lectures in Sydney (1964), the Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion at Oxford (1966-1969), published as *Avatar and Incarnation* (1970), the Westcott Teape Lectures in India (1973), and as Visiting Professor at the International Christian University in Tokyo (1977-1978). In 1975, during the XIIIth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions held at Lancaster, the University of Lancaster awarded him an honorary DLitt, which greatly pleased him.

Geoffrey's publishing output was phenomenal. The bibliography compiled by Martin Forward lists 29 single-authored and six edited books between 1949 and 1992, not to mention the numerous chapters in books, many articles and shorter works he produced. Geoffrey went on writing long after 1992, and he took pride in typing all his works himself. He only finished writing in January 2003, when he produced for the last time his regular report on 'Religion' for the *Annual Register of World Events*, which he had done for 45 years, the first and only person ever to do so, and he was rightly proud of this.

In terms of the lasting contribution and originality of his research, Geoffrey's pioneering work on African religions probably ranks highest, but his wide influence as a populariser is largely due to the many works he wrote on Indian religions, on Islam and on comparative themes which appealed to a wide reading public. Martin Forward mentions that *What World Religions Teach* has been Geoffrey's best-selling book, that his first work, *West African Religion*, was in print for forty years until 1989, and that during the mid-nineties Oneworld Publishers of Oxford reprinted five of his earlier books: *Jesus in the Quran* (first published in 1965); *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (1976); *Avatar and Incarnation* (1970); *The Bhagavad Gita: a verse translation* (1974) and *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions* (formerly *Sex in the World's Religions*, 1980) (Forward 1998: 27).

It is through many of these works that Geoffrey will be known among members of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education of which he was always such an active supporter. Appreciation of Geoffrey's contribution to the Shap Working Party is expressed below by two colleagues who recall his contribution to its early days. I remember him taking me to a very early Shap conference in York, I think, speaking with such enthusiasm about Shap's important work during our car drive there and convincing me that it would be a good



thing to join, and soon afterwards he suggested me as a new Shap member. I am very grateful to him for this as for many other things.

It is sad that Geoffrey is no more, but his memory and influence live on in the people he touched through his presence, his work, his unstinting efforts for promoting dialogue, better understanding and closer collaboration between people of different faiths and cultures, and for advancing the study of religions as a significant and meticulously researched subject area which deserves its rightful place in all educational institutions, from schools to universities.

I treasure above all the memory of a man of great compassion, kindness and a large heart, an admirable scholar and friend who flourished as a human being and made others flourish around him.

Ursula **King**, University of Bristol

July 4, 2005

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## Appreciations of Geoffrey Parrinder

### *John Hinnells writes:*

Geoffrey Parrinder taught me in the early 1960s at Kings. I think it was his first year there. The honest truth is I took Comparative Religion because it fitted my footballing diary (I was coach to the university soccer team). But Geoffrey's teaching created a love of the subject in me – as with so many people - and it basically changed my life in inspiring me to pursue an academic career in Comparative Religion. I do not think Geoffrey realized my motivation in my choice of subjects, but whatever the original reason he inspired me to change the course of my studies. He communicated his love for the subject. His lectures were clear and thought provoking. But I think even more than this we all had a deep affection for him as a person - gentle, compassionate, cheerful, thoughtful and sensitive.

Fortunately for me, Geoffrey and I remained in contact. In my early career he was one of my referees; when I organized the first Shap Working Party meeting I knew it was essential that he – and Ninian of course – came on board because they were such a good team in inspiring, motivating and communicating with teachers and students. They generated an atmosphere at that first Shap meeting which was crucial in the formative years. One part of that atmosphere was gentle humour – I recall on the second day walking across the hills with Ninian, Eric Sharpe (it was in that walk that Ninian persuaded Eric to write his History of Comparative Religion) and Geoffrey. Ninian and Geoffrey teased me - for my conservative

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taste in ties – they both liked flamboyant ties! But it was very much a friendly atmosphere, even though they were far senior to me. That first Shap conference was fairly pressured. Despite the enjoyment of the bar well into the early hours of the morning, we had intensive sessions back to back, the speakers working in relays so we could cover more. The informal discussions, on the hills, at the bar or over meals, were as important as the lectures. There was an air of passionate enthusiasm inspired by those two senior figures. It helped both the ensuing book (*Comparative Religion in Education* of which Geoffrey was one of the editors) and Shap that the then Secretary of State for Education, Edward Short, wrote an enthusiastic forward and thereafter discreetly approached several of us for advice, not least Geoffrey. When I was made professor of Comparative Religion at the School of Oriental and African Studies it meant Geoffrey and I were able to meet personally again and not just through letters. He had not changed. He was as gracious as ever.

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### ***Peter Woodward writes:***

Geoffrey Parrinder gave one of the inaugural lectures at the Shap Wells Hotel that led to the formation of the Shap Working Party. His scholarship, his humour, his panoramic breadth of vision and his love of communication with his audience were evident there, as they have been in all his activities and dealings with members of the Working Party.

He was elected at the outset as one of the initial three Co-Chairs of the Working Party, along with Ninian Smart and Professor Hilliard, and when the latter withdrew, Geoffrey and Ninian together steered us for many years in appropriate directions. No matter how busy, he always tried to attend our biennial meetings, at least for some part of the session, and was always available for consultation about the agendas for our meetings and the topics we should consider. He contributed to our early publications, particularly in the form of bibliographies, on African Religions, Mysticism, and other traditions; and of course he furthered the work of Shap by his own scholarly writings and television appearances and by 'bringing on' younger members with his encouragement and delegation of appropriate tasks.

One of my vivid memories is of his phoning me one afternoon to say he had just been asked to speak on television that evening about a particular topic in the news, but was unable to accept and would I find a Shap member to replace him or failing that do it myself! And typically he followed up with comment and reassurance the next day.

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His skills as chairman and organiser, his contributions as lecturer at several Shap courses not only at Shap but also at Goldsmith's College and at Chichester, his delight in relaxed conversation during meal breaks, between sessions and once the business of the day was overall this endeared him to us all, and his penetrating insight into the best course to follow in relation to Shap finance and general policy was invariably wise and perceptive.

To have Geoffrey and Ninian working in harmony was a key element in bringing purpose and direction to the Working Party, and we have been fortunate indeed to have had their input over such an extended period. This is indeed the end of an era, but, as he would so perceptively have said, with the foundations as effectively laid as they are, how can there be anything but confidence for our future?