

The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



Owen Cole -2012



The following is the obituary written by Eleanor Nesbitt for the Guardian and reproduced with her permission.

For many students and teachers, the name of my friend and colleague Owen Cole, who has died aged 82, is synonymous with the study of Sikhism. He was a pioneering educationist, staunchly committed to the transformation of religious education from instruction primarily in Christianity to a subject that would develop an understanding and appreciation of world faiths.

Owen was born in Sheffield and went to schools in Bradford and Newcastle. At Durham University he graduated in history and obtained a diploma in education. As a conscientious objector he refused to do postwar national service on the grounds that the Jewish and Christian scriptures stressed the need to love one's neighbours as oneself.

He met Quakers during his service with the Friends' Ambulance Unit and decades later (after many years in the Church of England) he joined the Religious Society of Friends. He was inspired by his father, a liberal-minded Congregational minister, and subsequently by his friendships with people of many faiths.

Owen taught in a primary school in Corsham, near Bath, in a comprehensive school in Harlow, Essex, and at Northern Counties College in Newcastle (now Northumbria University), before moving in 1968 to James Graham College in Leeds (now Leeds Metropolitan University). In 1980 he was appointed to the West Sussex Institute of Higher



Education (now the University of Chichester), where he became head of religious studies in 1984.

It was in Leeds that Sikhs became part of Owen's life. In 1969, he co-founded the influential Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. His commitment to multifaith religious education and his close friendship with the Sikh scholar Piara Singh Sambhi led to them writing – together and separately – many publications for schools on the Sikh tradition, starting with *Sikhism* (1973), as well as substantial works including *The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1978, republished 1995), *The Guru in Sikhism* (1982), *Sikhism and its Indian Context 1469-1708* (1984), *Sikhism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (1993) and *Understanding Sikhism* (2004). Owen's recent publications include the autobiographical *Cole Sahib* (2009) and *The Jesus Diary* (awaiting print publication).

Owen described himself as "a populariser rather than a scholar", yet his role nationally and internationally in furthering an informed understanding of Sikh tradition is incalculable. In 1980 he was appointed honorary Anglican interfaith consultant to the archbishops of Canterbury and York. In 1983 he was visiting professor in religious studies at Punjab University, Patiala, India.

Owen will be remembered for his integrity, compassion and determination. His wife and latterly carer, Gwynneth, whom he married in 1957, died two months before him. He is survived by their daughters, Eluned and Sian, and two grandchildren, Rhiannon and Ben.

Tribute to Owen Cole

I'll miss Owen very much, but am so glad that I knew him for many years, and also that I had the opportunity to spend a last afternoon with him on September 16 when he was in some ways his old self, although quite obviously also ready to go since he missed Gwynneth so much.

Like several of you, I probably may have met Owen also first at a SHAP meeting in the early seventies when Geoffrey Parrinder first took me to one in the North from London where I then lived. But I only really got to know Owen well in the mid-seventies when we moved to Leeds after our return from living in India. Owen soon enrolled at Leeds University to undertake research on Sikhism and we worked closely together over several years during which I learnt a great deal about Sikhism from him.

I also got to know his family and his great friend and collaborator, Piara Singh Sambhi, with whom Owen published several books. Owen's MPhil was soon published as "The Guru in



Sikhism” (DLT, 1982) and his PhD appeared under the title “Sikhism and its Indian Context 1469-1708. The attitude of Guru Nanak and early Sikhism to Indian religious beliefs and practices” (DLT, 1984). Owen was not only well known in Britain, but he became internationally well recognized as a great authority on Sikhism and he undertook a considerable amount of travelling and lecturing in later years.

Owen will be greatly missed by many. He was such a great friend and colleague, an excellent teacher and researcher, and a fine human being full of kindness, empathy and compassion. To give him the SHAP Award is a great idea and a very suitable way to honour his memory. I am all for it and hope to meet several of you on the day of the funeral.

Ursula King

Cole Sahib : The Story of a Multifaith Journey

W Owen Cole, has had a distinguished career in Religious Education, and has a world-wide reputation as a distinguished commentator on multifaith issues and practice, as well as on Sikhism. He has written -- on his own and in conjunction with others many well received books, continually used in teaching from primary to tertiary education, including: Six World Faiths (Continuum); Religious Education in the Primary Curriculum: Teaching Strategies and Practical Activities (with Judith Evans Lowndes; Religious and Moral Education Press); Six Religions in the Twenty First Century (with Peggy Morgan; Stanley Thornes); Spirituality in Focus (Heinemann); Hinduism (with Hemant Kannitkar, Heinemann); Understanding Sikhism (Dunedin Academic Press); The Sikhs: Their Religious Beliefs & Practices (with Piara Singh Sambhi; Sussex Academic Press). Owen Cole sets out on his journey towards a multifaith world view detailing his encounters with the Indo Pakistan subcontinent and the UK and those individuals -- Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian -- who were to shape his thinking and educational stances.

This book is required reading for those who have benefited from Owen Coles previous books, educators involved in multi-faith issues and questions associated with faith schools and school worship, and all those who enjoy biography at its sharpest.

By (author) **W.Owen Cole**