



## **30 Years on – John Rankin**

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1999 is the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Shap Working Party. It has been a significant part of my life for 29 of these 30 years. Back in 1969, the teaching of any religion other than Christianity within the context of RI (or Divinity or RK or whatever name was being used!) was just in its infancy. It was rejected by the majority of authorities and teachers; those who did not reject it, certainly felt acutely their lack of competence to stray from the well trodden path of biblical studies.

### **In the Beginning**

The Shap 'idea' was born during a course - 'The Comparative Study of Religions' given by John Hinnells at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne Department of Adult Education in January /February 1968. John Hinnells, together with Donald Butler, Alastair McKenzie and Owen Cole - three who were convinced of the need to widen the school curriculum and were attending the course - met after sessions to discuss how to promote the teaching of religion on a wider front. The current title for such study was 'Comparative Religion' and the name persisted for many years. However, it was often repeated that 'Comparative Religion made people comparatively religious!' John Hinnells had already modified this title to the 'Comparative Study of Religion'.

Later, teachers wanted to indicate that their purpose was not to compare religions as this always implied comparing unfavourably with Christianity! So from there it moved to using the expression 'World Religions' - which of course led to much discussion about what qualified as a 'world' religion. (This explains the 'Scottish Shap' preference for the expression 'Religions of the World') There was a lot of debate in the early days about definitions - including what counted as 'religion'!

(I am reminded of Ninian Smart's comment on the debate about the meaning of religion - 'Whatever it is, there is a lot of it about!') It is worth noting that German Universities are accustomed to the designations 'Science of Religion' (Religions-wissenschaft) and 'History of Religion' (Religionsgeschichte).

### **Shap Wells**

The full title of the Working Party is The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education Ltd. It was launched in 1969 at a conference planned by the individuals mentioned above and held at the Shap Wells Hotel, organised by the Department of Adult Education of the University of Newcastle on Friday to Monday 18<sup>th</sup> - 21st April. The venue provided the name by which the Working Party became known. The actual setting up of the Working Party was at James Graham College, Leeds (where Owen Cole was Head of Religious Studies), later in the year. The inclusive cost of that weekend at Shap Wells was £18 per head!



The desire was to promote the teaching of world religions, not only in schools, but also in Universities and Higher Education generally. There were, at the time, few departments in the university sector specifically concerned with the study of Religion as opposed to Christian Theology. However, Ninian Smart had been appointed to the new University of Lancaster to set up the first Department of Religious Studies – a department that was to be, for many, a trail-blazer in the study of religion. There can be few current teachers of Religious Studies who do not owe some debt to Lancaster or Ninian Smart's writings. He was also the Director (with Donald Horder) of the two Schools Council projects on the teaching of Religious Education - in secondary schools and later, in primary schools. These projects (the Lancaster Projects) too, were to become very influential. So Professor Ninian Smart was there, as were another notable writers in the field - Geoffrey Parrinder. Professor of Comparative Religions (sic) at King's College London, Eric Sharpe, at the time a Senior Lecturer in Comparative Religion at Manchester University and Professor Hilliard from the Birmingham Institute of Education. Professor Hilliard's 32 page book 'Teaching Children About World Religions' published by Harrap in 1961 must have been the first of its kind in the field.

At this first conference there were also representatives from teacher training colleges, such as Owen Cole and RE teachers. Donald Butler was Headmaster of West Denton High School, Newcastle upon Tyne. This is no apology for the preoccupation with people; it is the work of individuals giving freely of their time and talents which has characterised the activity and success of Shap. The dynamic has come from dialogue and an unforced sharing of views. Shap has always had a unique mix of University academics, teacher trainers and teachers participating on equal terms.

The early meetings were funded by The Spalding Trust (which also funded the personal chair on Eastern Religions of Professor Zaehner at Oxford). The sums involved were modest even by the standards then prevailing, but Spalding kept Shap alive for the first few years of its existence. The outcome of that first conference was a book, 'Comparative Religion in Education' (ed. by John Hinnells and published by the Oriel Press) - and an ongoing Working Party. Membership was by invitation of the founding group and there was a Secretary (John Hinnells) and Treasurer. Chairmanship was by way of 'joint' Chairmen, viz. Professors Smart, Hilliard and Parrinder. One of the stories later extant was that SHAP stood for Smart, Hilliard And Parrinder! Meetings were held over a 24 hour period at least once a year. Other meetings were held more frequently. Conferences continued at Shap Wells, usually in the Easter vacation. The Spalding Trust, however, made it clear that it was not prepared to go on providing money simply for meeting! Meetings, on the other hand were the source of the party's productive work, and Shap has been meeting ever since.



### **Three early achievements**

There were three early achievements of the Working Party. Firstly, the production of a 'Calendar of Religious Festivals'. This was a task initially undertaken by Peter Woodward, who had already taken on the job of Co-ordinating Secretary. He subsequently became the first sole Chairman of Shap and played a major role in reorganising the structures in a way that ensured the continuance of Shap.

The Calendar was published with the help of Borough Road College of Education, where Peter Woodward was a lecturer. This was the first attempt to make a calendar which included many religions and it has become a popular item for employers, police forces, social services - as well as schools. Today it is Shap's best selling production with an annual distribution of 13,000 – and now with a convenient wall chart, selling over 25,000.

For more than a decade the responsibility for the Calendar was in the hands of Clive Lawton (for many years Head of the King David School Liverpool). It is a measure of its success that occasionally members of specific religious groups have telephoned Shap to ascertain the date of one of their own festivals! With the calendar was a 'Mailing' which was sent out once a year to subscribers with, mainly, lists of recently published books and visual aids for teaching on world religions. This has now become the annual Journal. The Journal adopts a different theme for each edition and has many useful articles while continuing the provision of invaluable reviews of books of interest to teachers of RE. More recently a small group of Shap members, Leslie Prior, Valerie Thornevell and Nick Mead have been producing a Supplement for Primary Teachers to accompany the Journal.

Secondly, the Working Party produced a handbook on teaching world religions, called 'World Religions: Aids for Teachers'. This was edited by Peter Woodward and later became 'World Religions: A Handbook for Teachers', edited by Owen Cole and produced for the Working Party by the Community Relations Commission (subsequently renamed the Commission for Racial Equality). Again, these handbooks, and their successors, 'World Religions in Education', edited by Alan Brown and 'Teaching World Religions', edited by Clive Erricker, both published by Heinemann, have been valuable tools for many RE teachers.

Thirdly, a feature that was to continue for many years, was the running of Shap Conferences. The first of these was held at Shap Wells in 1970 and was on Hinduism. It produced a guide for teaching Hinduism that became a standard work. Shap Conferences were distinguished in two ways. Firstly, because of the connections of its distinguished academics, the very best experts in their field in the country were available to improve the knowledge of the participants at their own level. Secondly, Shap Conferences provided an authentic experiential element with the assistance of adherents of the particular religion being studied. Colleges of Education became the most frequent venues for Shap Conferences (notably Goldsmith's College London, Bishop Otter College in Chichester, the College of Ripon and York St. John in York (now Ripon and York) and St Martin's College in Lancaster). Today it has become increasingly difficult to provide conferences economically, because of the need to provide cover in school for those teachers wishing to attend.



## **Reaching out**

### **Shap Groups**

In the beginning Shap intended to operate in regional groups to avoid the necessity of travelling long distances to attend meetings. This was never properly achieved and the annual meeting became the focus for the efforts of individual members. Two regional groups, however,

made a significant contribution to the development of resources. The North East group, led by John Finel, contributed to the first CSE syllabus for RE called World religions at 16+, and later the NW group in Liverpool led by Vida Barnett focused on supporting Primary teachers in handling the teaching of world religions in their schools.

### **Scottish Shap**

Shap was born in the context of RE education in England and Wales. At the time there was no recognised secondary subject as such in Scottish Secondary Schools; Religious Instruction was statutory but it was seen as biblical nurture within the context of the whole curriculum. After the 'Millar Report' in 1972, Religious Education became a separate subject and specialist teachers began to be employed. From an early period, Scottish representatives were invited to Shap Working Party meetings. It was felt, however, that the system in Scotland was so different and Scottish identity so strong that an English ginger group was not likely to have much credibility in Scotland. So a Scottish Shap was formed. But of course it could not be called after an English village (even a Cumbrian village!). The title eventually chosen was The Scottish Working Party on Religions of the World in Education. The Scottish Working Party continues its separate existence, and that is another story to be told. Scottish representatives continue to attend Shap Working Party Meetings as fullmembers.

### **The Chichester Project**

Towards the end of the 70s, it could be said that some of the Shap objectives had been achieved in regard to the provision of teaching resources. In fact the impetus to stimulate good teaching material had brought into existence many colourful books and lots of transparencies of colourful ceremonies and artefacts. It was the beginning of the now familiar 'boxes' of artefacts relating to a particular religion. When it came to teaching religions outside the Christian tradition the preferred starting points were the observable phenomena, such as the ceremonies, images, festivals and family celebrations whereas in the traditional Christian syllabuses the starting points were the Bible, Christian doctrine, and Christian moral teaching. Many had noted that the approach to non-Christian religions was more colourful and attractive - often more motivating than previous traditional approaches, which seemed to derive from the needs of theological colleges rather than schools. So a project was initiated to investigate and promote alternative methods of teaching Christianity in schools. This task was initiated by John Rankin and the Chichester Project was born. A



charitable trust was formed. It began with modest funding from the Spalding Trust. The first series of Chichester Project books was launched through the Lutterworth Press and was aimed at Secondary Schools up to, what is now, Key Stage 3. Other volumes appeared later published by Longman, for primary schools, and included material across the spectrum of world religions. The task could never be considered complete, but I believe that it established a new style in teaching about Christianity - so much so that it has been a significant influence in agreed syllabuses of recent years.

### **Euro-Shap**

A more recent development has been the formation of the European Association for World Religions in Education mostly on the initiative of Dr. Herbert Schultze, formerly Director of the Comenius Institute in Munster, and a member of Shap since the late 1980s. The impetus for this Association derived from Shap members who had educational contacts in Europe. Shap members also made visits, on Herbert Schultze's invitation, to several teacher courses and conferences in Germany. The aims of EAWRE coincide with those of Shap and the members are drawn from Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Austria and some occasional representation from France, Italy and Greece. EAWRE is yet another story: one of its notable achievements, however, has been the production of a calendar of festivals, on the Shap model, in English, French and German.

### **Festivals in World Religions**

In 1986, Shap produced 'Festivals in World Religions' published by Longman. This was in response to a desire to provide more information than could reasonably be contained in the annual calendar of festivals. There was a subsequent paperback version and now the book has recently been completely revised, with a new publisher, RMEP.

Taking stock and Moving On

It cannot be demonstrated, without fear of contradiction, what the achievements of Shap have been in the last thirty years. In my judgement, however, the influence of the Shap Working Party on religious education in schools has been as follows. Firstly, I believe Shap played a significant role in changing the content of Agreed Syllabuses. Despite the criticism of some politicians in the debates before the 1988 Act using expressions such as 'religious mish-mash', Shap had a considerable influence in ensuring that religions other than Christianity were included in syllabuses.

Secondly Shap members were instrumental in changing approaches to teaching in RE. Through publications and courses on religion a recognised style of teaching emerged that examined closely the observable phenomena of religions. The phenomenological method remains neutral on the question of the truth of any item being studied and places the emphasis on understanding. The study of religion in school has generally become more varied and stimulating, encouraging greater enquiry and benefiting from contact with many



religious experiences. Shap and Shap members have been responsible for the production a very large proportion of the books and materials available for teaching world religions; more importantly perhaps, teachers have come to depend on Shap as a monitor of the quality and reliability of these materials. Shap has recently instituted an annual award for an outstanding teaching resource in world religions.

Thirdly, Shap has maintained its commitment to promoting and encouraging a mutual understanding between religions.

**Where does Shap go now?**

In many senses Shap has achieved its objectives for RE in schools. There still is, however, a need to have an instrument to continue the process of ensuring the provision of accessible information and stimulating teaching materials in world religions. Shap is not the only agency involved in this, but it has always had a propaganda function, and needs to go on convincing the doubters about the positive value of understanding religion and teaching young people to have respect and insight into the religious beliefs of others.

For many of its members over the years, Shap has been more than a professional organisation; it has been a fellowship of common purpose throughout most of their careers. Whatever the future holds, we hope that this great tradition of mutual respect and understanding will hold firm and make its contribution to a more peaceful world.

**Past members of the Shap Working Party**

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|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Vida Barnett        | Riadh el Droubie   | Geoffrey Parrinder |
| David Baldwin       | Robin More Gordon  | Roy Pitcher        |
| Harold Blackham     | John Greer         | Saida Rehman       |
| Robert Boyce        | Hugo Gryn          | Jim Robinson       |
| Desmond Brennan     | Pamela Hayes       | Trevor Shannon     |
| David Brewster      | K D D Henderson    | Eric Sharpe        |
| Donald Butler       | Roger Howarth      | Paul Shaw          |
| Jean Coghill        | O Raymond Johnston | Gordon Smith       |
| Elizabeth Cook      | Ron T Jones        | Richard Tames      |
| Viscount Combermere | Fatima Miles       | Joan Tooke         |
| Robin Davies        | Patrick Miller     | Ray Trudgian       |
| Jill Davies         | Heather Moore      | David Williams     |
| Moshe Davis         | Ted O'Conner       |                    |
| Elizabeth Wilson    |                    |                    |

***HMI Observers:***

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|----------------|-----------------|
| Alan Loosemore | Geoffrey Robson |
| John Goulding  | Ian Wragg       |



Present members  
of the Shap Working Party

Alan Brown  
Erica Brown  
Roger Butler  
W Owen Cole  
Clive Erricker  
John Finel  
Brian Gates  
Cherry Gould  
Mary Hayward  
John Hinnells  
Robert Jackson

Sue Kendall  
Ursula King  
Clive Lawton  
Nick Mead  
Carrie Mercier  
Peggy Morgan  
Bury Peerless  
Lesley Prior  
John Rankin  
Harun Rashid  
David Rose

Peter Schreiner  
Herbert Schultze  
Alison Seaman  
Kanwaljit Kaur Singh  
Ninian Smart  
Valerie Thornewell  
Deborah Weston  
Frank Whaling  
Paul Williams  
Angela Wood  
Peter Woodward

**Inter Faith Network Observer:**

Brian Pearce

**Associate Members:**

Sajda Currah  
Richard Gombrich  
John Hull  
Dilip Kadodwala