

Interfaith roots and journeys: Local and Personal perspectives

Peter Doble and Mary Hayward

In May we were invited to speak to the Interfaith group and explain something of its origins and roots in what was then The York Religious Education Centre at the College of Ripon & York St John - the Interfaith group took shape prior to the College becoming a University. Thinking about 'roots' in preparation for this prompted each of us to reflect on some of our own interfaith encounters and journeys which had led to our commitment to promoting an open approach to faiths and beliefs at the Centre. Since neither of us had a script for the meeting, we write now largely in a report format for readers who were not able to be present in May.

Journeys, roots and encounters

Peter: Shortly after India's exultation in its Independence and its trauma of partition (both in 1947), Peter lived for some years in Tamil Nadu; he recalled three encounters at that time which had contributed to shaping his approach to others' faiths. He spoke first of conversations with a Muslim watchmaker, still tensely nervous in a predominantly Hindu setting. They were two "aliens" in an India that welcomed them. Those personal conversations allowed a Christian to learn from a Muslim what it meant *to be muslim*. Later, weekly conversation with a Brahmin priest whose formal task was to polish Peter's Tamil, found "strangers" sharing in dialogue over Tamil literary texts, an ancient and celebrated tradition; dialogue led to opening up the Bhagavad Gita, and discovering how a Hindu interpreted this text. Finally, he was indebted to many conversations with people among the marginalised of Tamil society, where a listener learned from an underclass whose dreams and hopes and daily struggles were those of humans often ignored, sometimes despised by their fellows. From such encounters, Peter learned to reconceptualise the word "neighbour" in his own tradition, to listen more carefully to others, and to begin to understand the diversities and complexities of faiths. Consequently, York in the Eighties was to prove a deep cultural shock for him.

Mary recalled some of her earliest childhood recollections of those of other faiths.... a Sikh door to door salesman when she was a very small child; her father's Jewish business partner. Each of these was clearly only a subliminal influence, but in the Jewish case offered at least an oblique awareness of a different calendar and significant times - Sabbat, Pesach. School had added little to these experiences, and worse, although Mary had studied in a University Theology faculty which had a specialist professor in 'comparative' religion, and in Indian philosophy and Buddhism in particular, such areas of study were deemed inappropriate for undergraduates!

Work in London after University included teaching in a large comprehensive school comprising staff and children from many different backgrounds - Turkish Cypriot, Greek, North and South Indian, Malaysian, Caribbean - although the school gave little if any recognition to this rich cultural mix. Within ILEA (the Inner London Education Authority) however there was a growing interest in multicultural education, and an increasing awareness and developing conscience regarding Britain's colonial history.... although RE was at first little affected by these trends.

But the seminal experience for Mary, as well as opportunities to meet with members and study different faith traditions had come with a move to Lancaster University to work in

the new Department of Religious Studies, headed by Prof Ninian Smart. Unlike many other new universities at this time, Lancaster had established a place for the study of religion; its new department was open to those of any faith or none and its courses and staff reflected this. Among its courses were RAT, a course in Religious and Atheistic thought, Buddhist studies which attracted Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and Thailand, Islam (taught initially by a Scottish Muslim) and opportunities to study Hindu tradition; it was also recognised that understanding religions calls on other disciplines and so for example sociology of religion was a part of programmes there from the start. The department was also home to a major national project on Religious Education in the Secondary School (Mary was a member of its team). Recommended reading for those interviewed for research posts on this project included Ninian Smart's Heslington Lectures, delivered in the University of York in 1966 and subsequently published under the title *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*.

Among the many insights of this book, which had long reaching effects as far as RE was concerned, was Smart's identification of what he termed the *dimensions* of religion. These dimensions offered a ground plan, a map of a religion, which encouraged looking at religions holistically and in a balanced way, whilst also recognising their inner complexity. This notion of dimensions was taken up again by Smart almost 30 years later in his *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*; here his initial six dimensions gained a seventh and the dimensions were dually named as follows:

The ritual or practical dimension

The doctrinal or philosophical dimension

The mythic or narrative dimension

The experiential or emotional dimension

The ethical or legal dimension

The organisational or social component

The material or artistic dimension

Of course these dimensions are to be found with variations in balance and expression in different religions and indeed within different traditions within any religion; that balance will vary historically too - religions change. The interrelation of these dimensions also needs to be kept in mind; for example, practical community service may be motivated by belief, determined by ethical ideals, made possible by the social structure of the faith etc. What Smart has done is to offer a 'functional description' of religion rather than a definition. He helps his readers to 'see' a faith - and, importantly, not to be blind to its inner motivations and compulsions, hence his important recognition of the experiential dimension. For anyone involved in RE in the early 1970s this kind of thinking offered a radical departure from the biblical studies which had hitherto been the subject's focus. The task and possibility of understanding humankind's rich religious experience was now central.

This period in the early seventies was also marked in Britain by a slowly growing public awareness of the religions of those coming to work here from different parts of the Commonwealth. An early booklet published by the CRC (Community Relations Commission) around this time was *East comes West*, with sections written by faith members providing overviews of their faiths; this became an important handbook for those working both alongside and with these 'new' communities in the UK.

Another development which proved important for Mary's journey was the emergence of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. Its name is not an acronym - but recalls the Shap Wells Hotel in the Lake District where a conference on 'Comparative Religion in Education' was hosted in 1969 and which resulted in the formation of 'Shap'¹. Shap was very important in bringing together representatives of all levels of education, and included faith members with educational expertise who were ready to be active in promoting understanding of religions: through publishing, introducing teachers and others to major world faiths through conferences, producing a journal and also a reliable annual calendar of festivals with accompanying notes and contributing to public debate, Shap became widely known. An annual calendar remains available to the present, today covering 12 faiths and now available electronically for a very modest subscription.²

A second phase of life at Lancaster for Mary was lecturing at S. Martin's College (now the University of Cumbria); early ventures in teaching Religious Studies there were marked by enabling students to engage with different religious communities in the North West; students both met academic requirements in studying religions and met with and studied local communities, learning to be sensitive 'participant observers' - a helpful phrase adapted from the 'participant hermeneutics' explored at the time by the American writer Harvey Cox in his book *The Seduction of the Spirit*. Another phrase - again from Smart - which had remained with Mary from this time was that the study of religion should 'transcend the informative' - when teaching you are always trying to communicate something more than mere facts about another's faith.

After these glimpses of key early moments in their journeys, Peter and Mary invited those present to reflect for a few moments on their own encounters..... They then both spoke of their initial experience of York, which in 1980 had on a number of fronts seemingly little interest in the diversity of faiths already apparent in the City, and certainly evident elsewhere in Yorkshire.

In the light of their earlier journeys and a somewhat unpromising scenario in York they set out to develop the work of the recently established York Religious Education Centre. Two fundamental principles coloured their work at the Centre: understanding and engagement.

Understanding

Peter explained that working in the field of RE in the early 1980s meant working within many layers of ferment about multi-faith, multi-cultural issues; that ferment was largely an ongoing debate about RE's stance, about its purpose – was it, for example, to nurture into faith? to tolerate otherness? – and about its content -- does it, in “Christian” Britain include “other” faiths...? More generally, Britain was grappling with wider multi-faith, multi-cultural issues: the Swann Report caused more than ripples. This ferment was further complicated by widespread misunderstanding of the word “religion,” a weasel word concealing many

¹ The Working Party grew out of this conference. The book reporting on the conference is listed at the end of this piece. A brief history of Shap can be found on the website: www.shapworkingparty.org.uk

² The next e-calendar & accompanying notes, running from July 2015 to Dec 2016, will shortly be available for downloading at www.shapworkingparty.org.uk/calendar.html

issues. That misunderstanding was endemic among teacher groups, church groups, in the media and throughout the processes of legislation. In this ferment the Centre's stance was clear: its commitment was to fostering *understanding* of what it was to be human within the world's faith traditions. "Understanding" is a word that summarises a complex concept. Many of the Centre's courses entailed an exercise in conceptual analysis for people who might well have never before met such concern for discernment in using language. Briefly, by this kind of reflection, Mary and Peter sought to bring about in their contacts *a willingness and a growing ability to:*

- learn about another's world-view;
- listen to another;
- empathise with another, then
- reflect critically (that is, with reasoned judgment) on another's worldview.

This process carefully distinguished *understanding* from *commitment* to a worldview. But such understanding was brought about by guided reflection on engagement with people living within their faith traditions.

Engagement

Mary gave some examples of this. 'Engagement' here can mean a number of things; developing York RE Centre as a *national* centre (in the 1980s and 1990s there were 5 centres largely seen in this way) meant engaging with key developments in RE and with those engaged in determining its nature and future. For the Centre this meant an ongoing relationship with the National Society - one of its sponsors - and the Church of England, but also a wide range of other bodies and organisations. At a regional level, for example, the Centre contributed to the work of SACREs in many ways eg in the preparation and implementation of Agreed Syllabuses. Sometimes engagement went beyond the UK - for example, a major conference organised for EFTRE (European Forum of Teachers of RE) on the environment brought together in York teachers and lecturers from across Europe, and enabled perspectives from six religions to be presented and discussed. Another strand of engagement was with resources which we frequently reviewed for different organisations, but also made available through the Centre, and of course used in the wide range of teaching we undertaken much of it across the region.

Teaching and courses figured largely in the work done by the centre, and *this was the main focus of the kind engagement* Mary wished to highlight. An underpinning approach exemplified in the York Shap Conferences - 9 in all - a fruitful relationship between the Centre and Shap, and designed to enable teachers to encounter major faiths. These conferences had a number of ingredients: they offered an introduction to academic study of a particular faith, included opportunities to hear and/ or meet with members of the faith and an experiential aspect - for example, Sikhs from Leeds installed the Guru Granth Sahib during one conference and sang *kirtan*; at another, Buddhist monks lived long side conference members, who helped with food preparation and distributing this to the monks, following the pattern of their day and also attending early morning meditation. Of course such involvement was optional for members, but proved memorable, engaging and fostering deeper understanding of others' traditions - and often self understanding too. Transcending the informative was in action here. Another phrase which used to highlight engagement was cultivating 'a listening eye'. 'Seeing' may be more than just 'looking', letting the immediate take you beyond itself to questions and understanding. Developing a

listening eye is a useful concept when you examine artefacts or buildings; it was a skill teachers and students developed on visits and in researching and using the collections of artefacts from different faiths made available through the Centre. Such resources were also found to be helpful in enabling adults with learning difficulties to articulate their own experiences and memories, as well as 'connect' them to others' ways of life. Simulations - which can often be a subject of debate with regard to their appropriateness of course - were also part of the engagement strategies used - with care - thus for example offering a celebration of *Pesach*, keeping *Shabbat* at a weekend conference, became part of learning to understand Jewish tradition and a living encounter with a Jewish way of life.

A postscript.....

We were asked to explain how York interfaith group came to be! We have tried to give you a glimpse - and it is only a glimpse - of where we came from and of two principles which came to underpin our work at the Centre in the 1980s; the Centre's work and approach became widely known and - as we recall- we were approached by members of the Baha'i community and asked whether the Centre could help with the formation of a York Interfaith group. We were happy to do this, and although institutional constraints precluded financial support, we were very happy to provide a place for the group's early meetings and to mount occasional lectures and events which were of interest to the Interfaith group as well as a wider public. It is good to know that some 25 years later York Interfaith Group continues to prosper. Understanding among faiths remains vital to human flourishing. We conclude by sharing with you a quotation to which we have often returned:

No peace among the nations
without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions
without dialogue between the religions

No dialogue between the religions
without investigation of the foundation of the religions.

Hans Küng

Book 'archive':

Harvey Cox (1974) *The Seduction of the Spirit: The Use and Misuse of People's Religion*. London. Wildwood House.

John R Hinnells Ed.(1970) *Comparative Religion in Education*. Newcastle upon Tyne. Oriel Press.

Peggy Holroyde in collaboration with Mohammed Iqbal and Dharam Kumar Vohra (c1970) *East comes West: a background to some Asian Faiths*. London. Community Relations Commission.

Ninian Smart (1968) *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion*. London. Faber & Faber.

Ninian Smart.(1996) *Dimensions of the Sacred. An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. London.HarperCollins.