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Peggy MORGAN

Painting a Picture

ABSTRACT: I have sought in this piece to locate Brian Bocking's distinguished leadership and contribution to the academic study of religions in various contexts against the background of some history of the field's development -by selecting key methods and emphases that are relevant, especially from the formative times in the new Department of Religious Studies in the University of Lancaster from 1967, of which Brian Bocking was a part as a student from the early 1970s. In doing this I have acknowledged as a 'wash' on the canvas of the picture my own perspectives and subjectivity in the construction of the story and of these developments.

KEYWORDS: religion; religious studies; phenomenology

Peggy MORGAN is currently Lecturer in the Study of Religions at Mansfield College, University of Oxford, a college whose dissenting foundation has been hospitable to interest in the study of religions. She has served as both conference organiser and honorary secretary to the British Association for the Study of Religions and from 2000-2003 was Honorary President. In 2004 she organised its fiftieth anniversary conference in Oxford. From 1996-2000 she was Director of The Religious Experience Research Centre and has also served as chair of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (now The Shap Working Party on Education in Religions). She was in Lancaster from 1966-1976, initially lecturing at St Martin's College (Now University of Cumbria). Since moving to Oxford in 1976 she has contributed to the developments in the study of religions at Westminster College (now Oxford Brookes) and The Faculty of Theology (now Faculty of Theology and Religion). Her research interests are in methods in the study of religions and Buddhism, particularly Buddhism in the West and socially engaged Buddhism, but she has taught broadly across religious traditions.

Introduction

My piece for this celebration of the significant contribution made by Professor Brian Bocking to our interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of the academic study of religions will paint a picture from three palettes, each of which has its own tones and colours and potential for blending.

The first, but not the most important, like a background wash on the canvas of the final piece, provides a tinting of all its elements. That all our views are painted with personal background colour and that this colour, or these colours, then affect the final picture we produce, that we suffuse that colour into our pictures of the world, our worldviews, is now almost a truism in any academic and other work. The usual vocabulary is one of an author's distinctive subjectivity and of the need for her or him to be conscious of and declare their perspectives. In the case of this article this 'background wash' is my own understanding and selection of what has been significant and interesting in the development of the study of religions in UK, internationally and including most recently in Cork in the Republic of Ireland.

The second palette contains the distinctive new tones and mix found in the development of the non-confessional, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary academic study of religions which was developed by Ninian Smart (1927-2001) and his colleagues in Lancaster from 1967. This is like a backdrop of buildings and landscape on the final canvas against which the prominent foreground features are placed and stand out.

The third and most important of the palettes for the present task is the palette of colours from Brian Bocking's own varied interests and the emphases within his career, which in itself, as with the others, has very many tones. That will be placed in the foreground at the final stage of the painting.

As that final painting emerges, though, it is not always possible, as will be seen, to distinguish the tones and colours or the original palettes from which they come as they blend to make the final picture. Much may also mirror and overlap with other pieces in this volume in honour of Brian Bocking.

Those of us whose professional lives were transformed by, or from the beginning painted in, the colours of the innovative approaches of the new Department of Religious Studies in Lancaster have never forgotten its distinctive early ethos and its interest and impact both nationally and internationally on education in religion at all levels. What happens at primary and secondary schools was seen to be as important as the work in the research libraries of higher education institutions, a view not universally shared in many subject areas by those in universities in

particular. There was then and there a vitality and optimism in a new, shared enterprise which was accompanied by the making of warm friendships. These elements are not necessarily universal in academic life but for many of us they have stayed a part of our participation in the field and the connections made there remain with us, in memory and beyond. There was in particular a strong sense that the outlines and shape of the new enterprise were different from the other ways that religion had been and was being studied at all levels in education. This has made for a lively debate about the relationship between theology and religious studies which has not yet disappeared from and may never be resolved in our intellectual debates. My perspectives on that debate are dealt with in the relevant chapter of Corrywright and Morgan *Get Set for Religious Studies* (2006).

Religious Studies is not necessarily or universally now the preferred term for the task in hand. It should be noted that the studies are not themselves religious since, as mentioned above, the non-confessional emphasis has been important. Donald Wiebe, himself present in the early Lancaster days before returning to Canada, provides a perceptive survey and analysis of the use of the term in chapter six of John Hinnells edited volume *The Routledge Companion to The Study of Religion* (2005) and states right at the beginning. 'Not only is the term "religious studies" ambiguous with respect to the enterprise it designates, but the very idea of a "discipline" is itself vigorously contested' (Hinnells 2005, 98).

Wiebe's survey is international but amongst the secondary texts he analyses are the varied contributions in Ursula King's edited volume *Turning Points in Religious Studies* (1990), which covers approaches and developments in the UK scene. By this time Ursula King had moved from Leeds to the chair of The Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Bristol.

My preference has always been for the phrase the study of religions, with an emphasis on the final plural and making the point that the singular 'study' must be unpacked appropriately to indicate a plurality of approaches. The phrase 'study of religions' is in the titles of the British Association for the Study of Religions and also the European Association for the field. The International Association, on the other hand, has had frequent debates at its quinquennial conferences over the years but still maintains the term History of Religions, members sometimes claiming that 'history' is a term indicating more objectivity, a claim that would be contested by many if not most scholars in the field. National associations have varied titles and the singular 'religion', which to me has the danger of 'essence' discourse, is there in the titles used for the Canadian, Brazilian, South African, Indian, Greek and Czech Republic organisations. The French sometimes make reference to the progressive thinker in the phrase Société Ernest-Renan (1823-1872) Société française d'histoire as

well as using the phrase sciences of religions and the German term is religionswissenschaft. Greece adds the term 'culture', as do the S. and S.E. Asia associations. The term culture has also been the focus of significant discussions as an alternative, not just an addition to 'religion' in the work of Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) in particular and the department in Stirling, as well as for key anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) who described religion as a cultural system (1973). Switzerland and The Netherlands refer to the 'science' of religions and Spain, perhaps more helpfully as with France to the plural 'sciences'. Science is aptly used if, as for Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900) in his *Introduction to The Science of Religion* (1873) it means the collection, classifying and comparing of materials, in his case the sacred texts of the traditions. And for many it has been in their texts rather than their contexts and lived realities that religions have been delineated, though cultural anthropologists and social anthropologists have played one of the most creative roles in the study of religions to date in my opinion. Müller's use of the term science evokes the practice of Victorian botany or zoology as sciences, where discovery and putting together the resulting collections were of the highest priority. For others such as Emile Durkheim in his *Elementary Forms of The Religious Life* (1912 tr. 1915) being scientific is being rational and relying on reason rather than revelation for one's exploration of material and evaluation.

The idea of making comparisons is profiled in the Swedish association's title and Comparative Religion/s has been more in fashion again in recent decades, though for many of us it still carries the overtone of the time when Christian theologians tended to compare the 'others' to Christianity to the detriment of the others. It is, however, often the case that scholars see resonances between traditions, whether that is in their doctrines or ritual or ethics or any of the other dimensions.[1] But such comparison might appropriately be reflective rather than evaluative. Comparative is the term Eric Sharpe (1933-2000) uses for his scholarly historical survey of the development of the field *Comparative Religion: A History* (1976 2nd ed. 1985) and he wrote a shorter survey which was published posthumously in 2005 in *The Routledge Companion to The Study of Religion* edited by John Hinnells. It is obvious from his work that there is a pre-history which in parts had paved a way for the Lancaster developments but which I am not attempting to deal with here. And there are now very many excellent volumes on method and the history of the study of religions, though I will at this stage refer to only two volumes by

[1] The reference to dimensions evokes the familiar and much used descriptive model introduced by Ninian Smart in several of his publications. There were originally six dimensions but he later added the aesthetic/material and even before he died the political and economic. Bocking refers to these dimensions in his inaugural lecture for the chair at SOAS (2004).

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Ivan Strenski *Thinking About Religion* (2006). Strenski was part of the Lancaster scene in the early days before returning to California. After leaving Lancaster Sharpe established a new department in Sidney, Australia. He had been in Manchester before his time in Lancaster and in Manchester the term had a positive ring, as for his former colleague John Hinnells, since a chair in comparative religion had been founded there in 1904 the first occupant of which was the Pali scholar and pioneering buddhologist Thomas Rhys Davids (1843-1922) who, with his partner Carolyn Rhys Davids (1858-1942), another Pali scholar, was involved in the founding of the Pali Text Society in 1882 and in the School of Oriental Studies from 1916 which became the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1938, the context for a chair held by Brian Bocking before his move to University College Cork and whose inaugural lecture echoed many of the issues dealt with in these opening paragraphs.[2]

Another element in this debate about the appropriate descriptive term for the field is that for many the term religious studies smacks of a narrower phenomenological orientation to the neglect of other disciplines. This is why it is important to emphasise the term 'field' rather than continue to use the term 'discipline' as in the otherwise useful volume by Walter H Capps *Religious Studies: The Making of A Discipline* (1995). Of course, though phenomenology as Ninian Smart understood this complex term was important to him, Lancaster emphasised that the study of religions in being multidisciplinary needed and should include history, anthropology, sociology, philology, psychology and philosophy as well as phenomenological approaches and all the rest of the range of possible disciplines that might be appropriate in the study of religions, including theologies. Christian theologians were included in the staffing of the first years of the Lancaster Project and the first lecturer on Islam was James Dickie (Yaqub Zaki), a Scottish convert to that faith. In this context the term theology indicates insiders' perspectives which are, after all, needed for understanding traditions from the point of view of those people whose traditions they are, to make the subject of study speak with its own authentic voice, which to many of us is at the heart of what we mean by phenomenology. There is an excellent survey of key figures, formative influences and subsequent debates in James L. Cox *A Guide to The Phenomenology of Religion* (2006) and see also the relevant chapter in Corrywright, D and P. Morgan *Get Set for Religious Studies* (2006) and Gavin Flood's emphasis on being *dialogical* as a key quality in *Beyond Phenomenology (1999)*. Flood also has roots in Lancaster. Lancaster's

[2] Bocking (2004) reflects with a critical eye on related points such as the subjectivity of the scholar, Smart and Lancaster's claim to methodological agnosticism; the focus on phenomenology; the relationship of cultural studies and theology to the study of religions and the ideas of a 'warm science' and 'detached empathy' he took from his Lancaster days as well as the use of the term 'discipline'.

emphasis was clearly that one needed the phenomenological skills of sympathetic imagination, of understanding from the perspective of the 'other', to engage in the task of studying religions and that one should be able to move about from outsider to insider perspectives. It is often quoted that Smart liked the North American Indian proverb (we would now attend to insider sensitivities and refer to the first nation peoples' perspective) that you should never judge a person till you have walked a mile in their moccasins. And in the volume of the journal *Religion* (a journal originally founded in Lancaster) dedicated to Smart after his death, Adrian Cunningham (d.2012), one of the founding members of the Lancaster Department, quotes Smart's insight that 'the science of religion requires a sensitive and artistic heart' (2001, 326).

As well as the variety of methods indicated above, the emphasis was that a plurality of religions and worldviews should be the focus of both research and teaching. This plurality of methods and worldviews is always, of course, an ideal, since few departments have enough funding for a perfect range of approaches and specialists in the variety of traditions there are. I have introduced the term worldviews above since Smart later indicated that he preferred the phrase worldview analysis to religious studies and he had, of course, himself written on *Mao* in 1974, including whether one could see Mao as a religious leader if one used his six dimensional model to look at the Maoist phenomenon. A course on modern religious and atheistic thought in the west was part of the first package of offerings in Lancaster initially taught by Adrian Cunningham who was a founder member of the Catholic Marxist Slant Group in his Cambridge days. There is still a current version of the course taught by Gavin Hyman who has written *A Short History of Atheism* (2010). The courses were to have not only an historical dimension but demonstrate a more modern orientation with the contemporary influence of thinkers such as F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), often called the father of the study of religions as well as of modern theology; E. Durkheim (1858-1917); G. F. Lessing (1729-1781); E. Troeltsch (1865-1923) and L. Feuerbach (1804-1872) as well as S. Freud (1856-1939) placed on the syllabus amongst others. It is obvious how controversial this was as was the possibility of the range of religions and thinkers focusing on religions at a time when some might still have agreed with Parson Thwackum in Henry Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* (1749) who in discussion with the deist Mr Square on the relationship of honour and religion expostulates that when he mentions Religion he means the Christian Religion; and not only the Christian Religion, but the Protestant Religion; and not only the Protestant Religion, but the Church of England. Many of the existing Theology departments and degrees (the term should always have an adjective and in this case be called Christian Theology) not only insisted that undergraduates spent a lot of time learning Greek and Hebrew or both, but had core syllabuses which took

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the exploration up to the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD / CE) only. These degrees were also at that time mainly staffed by people who were insiders to the tradition and assumed an 'us' in their presentation of material. Here our picture's background wash will show through. The relationship between theology still often understood in that way and the newer religious studies has been hotly debated ever since the Lancaster project laid down the challenge. I vividly remember a remark which I first heard Brian Bocking say and was later in an article from 1994 'If you don't know the difference between theology and religious studies, then you are a theologian'.

The reason this resonates for many of us is part of the personal histories of a generation older than Brian's but also the continued institutional contexts in which many of us have worked and in which religion is studied. I shall give my own example and declare my perspective in the background wash to my picture.

I have a first degree in Christian theology, though it did not have the adjective, a choice of degree which I thought would involve an exploration of 'ultimate concerns' (to use Paul Tillich's phrase) and creative textual analysis. I had been imaginatively taught and worked outside the formal examination syllabus, reading in the sixth form quite contemporary works by P. Tillich (1886-1965) and R. Bultmann (1884-1976), neither of whom featured on the syllabus I embarked on as an undergraduate. I was disappointed by the then universally traditional university syllabuses for the subject, which seemed to assume a confessional, insider status and were entirely focused on Christianity, even in the study of what was then always called The Old Testament rather than the Hebrew Scriptures. Historical work covered mainly Christianity's earliest centuries with no contemporary content, whereas in Lancaster The New Testament was taught through the very up to date history of its interpretation through the work of figures such as R. Bultmann, E. Käsemann (1906-1998) and others, and there was a course on the social and political aspects of modern Christianity. One exception to the menu in my undergraduate days was a voluntary seminar on Martin Buber's *I and Thou* introduced by James Richmond, the philosopher of religion and systematic theologian who later taught in Lancaster.

During that time as an undergraduate I was fortunate enough at a Study Swanwick conference to have heard Ninian Smart give a single lecture on the problem of evil and suffering looked at from the perspective of Indian religious traditions. He asked in particular whether the questions and problems were posed in the same way as in the dominant Christian philosophical discourse on theodicy and also whether the answers to the questions were the same. I turned to the friend I was with and said 'that is the sort of thing I really want to do' and later could not believe my good fortune when lecturing at St Martin's College, Lancaster

in 1966 (now University of Cumbria) that in 1967 there was to be founded a new Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster with Ninian Smart as the founding Professor.

Not only the emphasis on modern thinking with the course by 1970 on social and political aspects of Christianity but the inclusion of a religion such as Buddhism and a focus on Japanese Religions are good examples of the challenges to syllabus content presented in Lancaster. Questions were and still are debated as to whether Buddhism is a religion at all since there is no 'God' and it was not perceived by some to be relevant as a focus of study in UK in the same way as those traditions where there were already migrant communities. It also raised questions such as 'do Freud's theories hold water in relation to a religion such as Buddhism?' The teaching of Buddhism in Lancaster was strong from the early days with the presence of Edward Conze as a visiting scholar, Michael Pye recently back from six years in Japan and with Ninian Smart's own interest in Theravada Buddhism from his Sri Lankan experience. Smart's contacts brought to Lancaster a flow of Sri Lankan Buddhists, many of them bhikkhus, who came to do doctoral work with him. The presence of the bhikkhus, even from just one cultural background, showed just how diverse were the possible understandings and observance of their conventions of life and the need to avoid stereotyping. The spectrum of observances in what they ate, for example, ranged from one bhikkhu who was not prepared to crack an egg to a very senior monk who cooked and ate chicken with us. On another note on the effect teaching a religion might have (see also Bocking 2004: 109), Smart quickly but gently pointed out when lecturing in Northern Ireland and being challenged by members of his audience on the relevance of studying Buddhism in that context that, far from being irrelevant for people there, to study Buddhism would bring an understanding of *ahimsa* (non-harming; non-violence) which was deeply apt.

Texts and the need for language skills if anyone wanted to go further in their studies were obvious from the role models in the department. In the case of Buddhism Edward Conze was the key translator of the Sanskrit *Prajnaparamita* literature and knew Tibetan; Ninian Smart knew both Sanskrit and Pali as well as Chinese (and of course Italian) and the multi-lingual Michael Pye was fluent in Japanese amongst other languages. But the learning of original languages was deliberately not a compulsory way that undergraduates had to spend their time. It was considered that there were other more relevant emphases and stimulating material that at that undergraduate stage of academic work intellectual energies might be expended. It goes without saying and with reference to his publications that Brian Bocking, as did others in their postgraduates lives, successfully tackled the language challenge when it was clear why it was necessary.

It was at the core of the Lancaster project with its originally very innovative vision of how to study religions, which religions might be studied and how to avoid stereotyping, where Brian Bocking's academic work began at undergraduate level. The original advert for the professorial post in Lancaster said that the applicant could be 'of any religion or none' and the lack of confessionalism in the field that this heralded has been an important aspect of Brian Bocking's career. It is to many of us obvious that Lancaster's new perspectives and syllabuses should continue into the questions of which religions or traditions might be considered to be appropriate for research and teaching. Should one stick to the main line of what and who is generally agreed to be "Buddhism' or 'a Buddhist' or should academic work (some would add 'objective' or non-biased, but that term presents a package of debate) take us into including in our studies any group or person, however marginal or controversial and with an acknowledgement of their self-definition. So this has taken scholars into work on indigenous traditions; new age spiritualities; witchcraft and much else.

Completing the Foreground

As mentioned above, against the background of the establishment of new ways of studying religions and the vitality of the enterprise has been the sense that the subject area and ways of teaching it/approaches mattered at all levels and ages of education from infancy to old age. This attitude was part of Brian Bocking's formation and the interest of his tutors both in Lancaster and Leeds. Many university academics, alongside school teachers and those in colleges of education, were involved in the founding in 1969 of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (now The Shap Working Party on Education in Religions). The emphasis that religious education in schools is important and should be on the agenda for anyone interested in the study of religions was sustained by Brian Bocking not only in his supportive collaboration with the experts in that area with whom he worked, especially at Bath Spa alongside Denise Cush in particular and others, but also in a research project module established in Cork on Religious Education, which involved contact with what is happening in the Republic of Ireland's primary and secondary schools both from printed syllabuses and direct contacts with teachers and parents.

Earlier in this article I said that in the formative days of the field many saw religions as inhering mainly in their scriptures, in their belief systems, in their history and in the authority of leaders not ordinary members. There were, of course pioneering anthropologists such as Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), but their ground-breaking fieldwork was usually on

what was far away: Africa in his case. Working nearer to home on local community religions was pioneered in the Leeds Community Religions Project. Their early doctoral students published monographs such as Kim Knott's *Hinduism in Leeds: A Study of Religious Practice in The Indian Hindu Community and Hindu-related Groups* (1986). Of course by this time there was a greater variety of religious groups in places such as Leeds which made the enterprise possible and particularly relevant. The research brought actual involvement in local communities and was in particular encouraged by Michael Pye and Ursula King. In Bath Spa work on living religions have continued beyond Brian's time there. In the Cork Department both undergraduates and MA students are encouraged and even obliged to visit and research religious communities of their choice and to document their origins, development and place within the wider society. These projects might look at the changes taking place in Roman Catholic religious orders, but by now Ireland also has many other communities and a large project on Islam as well as Buddhism in Ireland have been significant. Going beyond stereotypes also involves attention to indigenous cultures and that has been part of students' work in Ireland as well as significant in the international research of Lidia Guzy and James Kapalo, colleagues in the *Marginalised and Endangered Worldview Study Centre* (MEWSC) at Cork, where there is a significant interest in the sometimes neglected material and performance dimension of these cultures.

Going beyond stereotypes, challenging the conventional picture and the current boundaries of knowledge can happen in other ways, too. With his usual capacity for collaboration along with colleagues Alicia Turner and Laurence Cox and Phibul Chompolpaisal and across geographical boundaries Brian Bocking has been involved in research and publishing on Dhammaloka, The Irish Buddhist and in the wider context with Alicia Turner, Laurence Cox, Phibul Chompolpaisal, Brian Bocking eds. *A Buddhist Crossroads: Pioneer Asian Buddhists and Asian Networks 1860-1960* (2014), part of a story which is ongoing in research terms and which focuses on quite a different cultural background to the first westerners seriously involved in Buddhist practice than the story told thus far, as also in the story of the Irish Japanologist and pioneer London Buddhist missionary Charles J.W. Pfoundes (1840-1907). Pioneering in Sikh and Punjabi Studies, too, has been shown to have Irish roots in the figure of Max Arthur Macauliffe (1841-1913).

All of the scholars who have worked on Japan have brought to our attention the difficulty of defining and identifying not only what is meant by 'religion' in that context, especially since the Japanese often claim not to be religious, but also the impossibility of disentangling the dual allegiances and cultural blendings that exist between Shinto and Buddhism and Brian Bocking's work on the accretive *Oracles of The Three*

Shrines (Sanja Takusen) 2000, which focuses on the aesthetic or material dimension as an expression of the complexity of Shinto/Buddhist history and identity have illuminated that issue in an original way. And the kind of complexity, hybridity, the crossing of rigorously and artificially imposed boundaries in much of our discourse is something that Brian Bocking attends to in all his work and in the support he gives to the research of those who work with him.

Many of these innovative research projects, which are always accompanied by the widest possible dissemination in well-attended conferences and involvement of colleagues, have needed monetary funding and Brian Bocking has been tireless in obtaining that funding and arguing the case for the importance of the enterprise not only for himself and his department but for a wider circle of colleagues. Enterprises thrive with Brian at the helm. That was obvious in a very different context when he was at the helm for the Association of Departments of Theology and Religious Studies (AUDTRS, now TRS UK), which produced an annually updated handbook of members of departments with their teaching and research interests. This, as with as many as possible of Brian's enterprises went on line. He has always been very up to date with technological dissemination.

All of these things involve a strong presence and leadership, efficiency and a capacity to argue a case and hold his ground. But it is never done in a humanly oppressive way but with warmth and enthusiasm. He has always been very clear where the issues are, whether challenging perceptions of the use and usefulness of the category of religious experience in China at the Edinburgh BASR conference focused on that theme, or reacting to and putting aside my suggestion that BASR be expanded to an Association for the Study of Religions for Britain and Ireland and going on to jointly found the Irish Association with its own independent participation in EASR and IAHR. He himself mentions in relationship to his approach to the study of religions an 'epistemological humility' (2004:110) which rings very true in respect of other encounters. I remember vividly his support when I was organising conferences for BASR. He was a meticulous proof reader and always ready with creative suggestions, but comment was delivered in a positive and encouraging way. His personal support of colleagues in BASR and EASR and IAHR is reflected in the warm affection in which he is held. He remarks on reflection that though the foundational days in Lancaster were not Eurocentric and that phenomenology was very developed, there was no anticipation of feminist theory and it did not try to understand gender (2004:108). He has certainly enabled the adjustment of that in balance not least in the teams with whom he has worked and his generous nature. Some readers will know why a particular tea towel printed with a map of

Ireland clearly showing Cork has been valued by me since October 2000 and a day return visit to Oxford by Brian.

I hope the image I have used of multiple palletes of colours blended to make a distinctive picture of a career that so far has shown up much of the richness of our field is acceptable to our honorand. The other titles I thought of using would also have indicated the contribution he has made. They were: Moving Across Boundaries; Exploring New Horizons; Challenging Conventional Stereotypes and Hybridity. I also hope there has been accuracy and no offence in what I have written, especially in what I have written in relationship to people. If not may I apologise and ask for corrections. And I am looking forward to using the recipe book produced by Sheelagh during her creative time of organic gardening in Cork.

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