



Eric J Sharpe
By permission of Mrs Birgitta Sharpe

Eric J. Sharpe
(1933–2000)

Sometimes Australia's National University, as the ANU now likes to present itself, misses the boat. In the early '70s, it approved the establishment in The Faculties of a Chair to head a department of Religious Studies. It was a 'courageous' initiative. There were few at that time who were aware that Religious Studies as an academic discipline, having to do with religion as a social, intellectual and spiritual dimension of human life, was qualitatively and conceptually different from Religious Education, let alone even a field as time-honoured as Biblical Studies. Most saw it at best as a decorative adjunct to vocational training for clergy; or at worst, if offered in a state university, as the thin end of a wedge that might split the bulwark of separation between church and state.

There was an opportunity for Canberra to offer the Chair to Eric Sharpe. For reasons best known to the minutes of electoral committee meetings, it was lost. And in 1975, when the first wave of cut-backs in University funding was beginning to bite, the plans to establish a Religious Studies program were dropped. And so in May 1976, Eric Sharpe was appointed Foundation Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Sydney. He took up the appointment in 1977, and forthwith set to work to establish a program of which both that University and Australia could be proud.

Already in 1976, his intellectual background was impressive. He had previously held appointments in Religious Studies in the United States and Canada as well as the United Kingdom, notably at the Universities of Manchester and Lancaster, institutions of very high standing in the field. He had published five important books, contributed a number of chapters to books of seminal quality and character, and many significant journal articles, some in Swedish. The titles of these works, in particular *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: the Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant missionary thought in India before 1914* (Studia Missionalia Upsaliensis VI 1965), *Comparative Religion: a History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), and 'The Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue' in J. Hick (ed.), *Truth and Dialogue: the Relationship between World Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1974), are a guide map to the paths his intellectual interests would follow and the values that informed them.

His research continued to flourish after his move to Sydney, despite the administrative demands on him by a headship of a department in a large University. He was elected to the Academy in 1983. In retrospect, the honour was patently overdue, in part because the pioneering nature of his field in Australia when he was appointed to Sydney left it largely unrecognised, and

in part due to the compartmentalising effect of the sectional structure of the Academy. In the event, his name was put forward on the initiative of the Asian Studies section.

He was British, his ancestry bringing together bloodlines of Cornwall and Cumbria. Born in 1933, he belonged to a generation still liable to National Service, and whose intellectual and cultural horizons might well be expanded by this experience. As a conscript, he was posted to the Royal Army Educational Corps, and spent most of his army years in northern England. As an NCO—although to those who knew him, the expression Sergeant Sharpe appears oxymoronic—it gave him the opportunity to observe how the Military Police dealt with ‘tribal’ conflicts erupting between British Other Ranks returning from duty in Malaya (as it then was) and Korea. After demob, before going to Hartley Victoria College (University of Manchester) he worked for some months in an ironmonger’s shop at a resort town near Lancaster, where he learnt skills and a technical vocabulary relating to builders’ requirements in hardware and tools that were a stand-by all his life—an experience that contributed to the gracious common touch he had with individuals of all social backgrounds. He trained for the Methodist Ministry, completing a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree in Theology though he never ‘took up the cloth’. While at Manchester, he was deeply influenced and indeed inspired by Professor S.G. F. Brandon, a pioneer of Comparative Religion in University Education. This prepared the ground for the next step in his career, one that involved a Swedish connection, and was to enrich him intellectually and personally. In 1961 he was awarded a fellowship to University of Uppsala, where he was awarded a doctoral degree in 1965. There he met Anna-Lisa Birgitta Johannesson, whom he married in 1962, and who was to be a continuing inspiration and support to him for the rest of his life. Even after the appointment to Sydney, Sweden continued to hold a deep attraction for him, and from 1978-81 he was also Professor of the History of Religion at Uppsala. In the end, however, Australia won both his and her total allegiance, despite the competing allurements of Sweden and North America.

He was active in many fields, maintaining international connections with Scandinavia, the USA and Canada. He represented the University of Sydney in many public functions. He was a regular broadcaster on Radio National, speaking on early morning radio programs on religion, society, politics and cultural issues generally. His interests extended well beyond his academic field. He served as a Blake Prize judge, and opened a Blake exhibition. He was the inaugural lecturer of the Celtic Studies Foundation. He was a gifted musician, a flautist and composer, but he also sang, and was founder conductor of the Sydney Swedish Singers.

I worked with him on a number of occasions. I first met him in Lancaster in 1975, when he was Acting General Secretary of the International Association

for the History of Religions (IAHR) and Chair of the Organising Committee of the XIII International Congress of the Association. In 1985 he was Congress Chairman, when the XV International Congress of the Association was held in Sydney, largely thanks to the reputation of the department he had built up. In Australia we met at various of the annual conferences of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. On one such occasion, while serving as Chair for the 1984 Conference of the Association, I invited him to make the after dinner speech at the Conference dinner. He gave a wise and witty performance, concluding with a wonderful take off of the archetypal Pom (for he never forgot his English roots) who always found something to whinge about. 'Yes', he said, 'many things in the organisation of this conference were excellent, perfect, almost. However, although the white wine was plentiful, there wasn't much red. And what there was wasn't good enough.'

But scholarship, initiative, sociability and good humour apart, throughout his career, Eric was not only playing a pioneering role in his field, but in the evolution of public attitudes in Australia at a time when the religious and ethnic landscape of the nation was undergoing radical change. Alongside the role of religion in society, he was concerned with cross-cultural perceptions of religious traditions. His work involved a critique of European approaches to non-Christian religions, in particular the difficulties western scholars encountered when, for whatever reason, they tried to come to terms with the religious traditions of South Asia. He was concerned at both an intellectual and personal level with the fundamental challenge of religious diversity: how to reconcile such diversity with the exclusivist truth claims of individual religious traditions. In all, he was seeking ways to recognise and encourage pluralism, and to bring people to welcome, respect and learn from cultural diversity.

He had his share of honours. One that meant a great deal to him was an honorary life membership of the IAHR, an award rarely bestowed on international scholars. Health problems brought about his early retirement in 1996. It was marked by a farewell Symposium at the University of Sydney, the results of which were published in 1999 as volume two in the Sydney Studies in Religion series under the title *This Immense Panorama*, a treasure chest, a panorama indeed of approaches to the study of religion and of religions in the Australian context. An earlier Festschrift, equally rich and illuminating, *The Sum of Our Choices*, edited by his former colleague Arvind Sharma, no. 4 in the series McGill Studies in Religion, of McGill University, Canada, was published in 1996.

After his retirement, he continued to work, and brought to conclusion a work on a history of conceptions of the Kingdom of God—of which I have no doubt he is now part—and which, alas, will have to be published posthumously.

Despite his outstanding reputation, he did not take himself too seriously, and had a lively, elegant pen he used, delicately to take to task those who did.

In an adaptation of Ko-Ko's 'Little List' song from the Mikado, he wrote of types of 'leading academics who might well be underground' and who never would be missed:

'There's the pestilential nuisances who deconstruct the past -
All chasers after fashions who can't bear to come in last -
All those who write at painful length with nothing much to say -
And shake your hand at parties, but look the other way -
And no matter what the subject, on being heard insist -
They'd none of 'em be missed - they'd none of 'em be missed!'

Eric, need I say, is very much, very sadly missed.

Anthony H. Johns