

Obituary

ERIC J. SHARPE
1933–2000

Eric Sharpe died in his Sydney home on Friday, October 19 from heart trouble. Eric was known above all for his scholarly and widely used book *Comparative Religion: a history* (Duckworth 1975, second expanded edition, 1986). It became the standard work on the subject throughout the English speaking world and was translated into Chinese, Hebrew and Korean. Because of his fluency in several European languages, it showed a deep understanding of a great range of western thought. It was criticised by some for not devoting more attention to sociological studies, a weakness that Eric was himself aware of. But otherwise this masterly and thought provoking study of western approaches to the study of religion has been widely respected and used. A major theme of his writings was Christian approaches to (the study of) other religions. It was the subject of his Swedish Doctorate (Uppsala 1965) published under the title *Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: the contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914* (Lund 1965). He also published on A.G. Hogg, K.L. Reichelt and one of his great heroes the Swedish archbishop, Nathan Soderblom (University of North Carolina, 1990 and Uppsala 1984).

His interests ranged more widely than this. His interest in Christianity in India inspired an interest in Indian religion, for example the *Gita* (*The Universal Gita*, Duckworth, 1985). His seven years in Uppsala (1958–65) gave him a deep and abiding love of Scandinavian topics not least in its ancient history and religion, a subject on which he published a number of articles (for example in *Man and His Salvation, Essays in Memory of SGF Brandon*, eds. Sharpe and Hinnells, Manchester, 1973) and resulted in him translating nine books from Swedish into English. As someone who worked closely with him, I know him to have been a very fine teacher, as countless students around the world will testify. Perhaps the book which reflects this side of person best is *Understanding Religion* (Duckworth, 1983). But his primary field remained interfaith dialogue. As someone quietly devoted to his Christian faith, yet with a great sensitivity to people and ideas of other religions, he was throughout his life fascinated by the interface between faith and scholarship, of the interaction between religions, and for him the centre of that latter concern was India. It was this engagement with faith, which resulted in his focus on the belief rather than the social dimension of religions. In his last piece of writing, completed a few days before his death, Eric revisits his *History of Comparative Religion*. This is a chapter for a forthcoming Penguin Companion to the Study of Religion, edited by Hinnells, a book which will be dedicated to his memory.

Many honours were bestowed on him, and he achieved an international respect holding posts at Manchester, Lancaster (the city of his birth), a chair in Uppsala and visiting posts in Indiana, Manitoba, McMaster and New Haven. He organised two international Congresses of the International Association for the History of Religion (Lancaster 1975, Sydney 1985), serving as Deputy and then Acting General Secretary of that Association (1970–75). His Chair in Religious Studies at Sydney (1977–96) was the first Chair in the subject in Australia. He was therefore a pioneer in developing the subject in that region and he was elected President of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions (1983–5).

As a person, Eric was deeply honest, the embodiment of kindness and good will. He was also more creative than many of his contemporaries realised, above all in the field of music. He conducted orchestras, played the flute, and with his wife Birgitta establishing choirs in any place where they stayed. Even during the later years of his life, after his five fold by pass heart operation, which restricted him to home for the last couple of years, he retained a warm and lively sense of humour. He leaves a widow, Birgitta, and many friends around the world.

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