

**AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS
Annual Conference 2001**

“Religion and Public Policy”

in association with the ‘Spirit of Australia’ Conference
organised by AASR, ANZATS/ANZSTS and ATF

**Queen’s College, Melbourne
Monday 2nd July to Sunday 8th July 2001**

**ANZATS/ANZSTS conference 2nd - 4th July
Joint conference 5th - 6th July
AASR section 7th - 8th July**

CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers, Workshops and Panels are invited particularly on topics relating to religion and public policy and religion and society. Other papers will also be considered.

WHO IS THIS CONFERENCE FOR?

- scholars of religion in universities and colleges (staff & postgraduates)
- teachers of religious education
- those with an informed interest in religions past and present

ABSTRACTS

Abstracts for papers, workshops and panels, of no more than 150 words, including a title and author’s institutional affiliation are invited for submission. Send to Philip Hughes.

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- 1979. Denominational switching in the seventies: Going beyond Glock and Stark. *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 18:363-78

Wuthnow, R. 1978. *Experimentation in American religion*. University of California Press, Berkeley

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EULOGY

Eric John Sharpe
 St Alban's Anglican Church
 25 October 2000

What makes a great and good man, an Eric John Sharpe, a gentle, debonair, witty, sometimes hilarious person to be around, yet every inch the professor, the poised, authoritative, commanding, indeed exacting intellectual?

Perhaps many of us here will have known Eric as that friendly snowy-haired academic who retired to the suburbs, and did such a lot to enrich the life of the Swedish community, especially with his musical talents, and to help his wife Birgitta in entertaining the string (sometimes throng!) of Swedes who have come tramping through our city. You might have wondered why this older Englishman spoke such fine Swedish and could even crack a joke in it better than the "natives" themselves. And he himself wouldn't be inclined to let on. You might have been tempted to banter with him, in a friendly way, for being a crusty academic at all, an Emeritus from the ivory tower, and what was it he specialized in? - Religious Studies, for goodness sake; hardly connected to the international marketing of Volvos or Ikea. And he was not going to rush in and tell us why he could stand among the famous.

Then there are many others of us who knew Eric at the University of Sydney or knew him in the wider public forum as a university figure. It was perhaps a matter of awe that he was Australia's first and Sydney's Foundation Professor in Religious Studies; but, you know, one cannot expect from most of the huge crowd of specialists across the academic board a clear appreciation of what was singularly important about Eric's work. You'd have to be teaching or studying about religion to have much of an inkling. How hard I found it to explain to the media that we had in Australia the foremost authority in the world on how you would go about orienting yourself if you wanted to study "other religions." How you get your methods straight, what tricks of the trade you must grasp - like checking your own prejudices! - and what you should know about the many eminent thinkers who have written about religion before you. It's a hard thing to convey. But this is a simple fact. Eric was the leading figure on such matters. Turn up to big international conferences on Comparative Religion or the history of religions, and whose standard will be being held up as setting the best methods for understanding humanity's diverse religious life? Those of my dear friend and yours, the man whose life we are honouring right now.

Some of us might remain a little bewildered at a career devoted to such matters. But, when we consider that the world is fairly bleeding to death through misunderstandings about deeply held beliefs, we will intuit immediately that the educative and scholarly work of Eric Sharpe has a long future. The many volumes he published and the hundreds of students and colleagues around the world he has inspired are indeed more basic for our eventual survival than, say, accident-proof Volvos. They impinge on how a society - an intensely multicultural society like Sydney's - handles religious differences, on how people of differing keenly-felt persuasions can deal with each other in patience, attentiveness, respect, and indeed

Eric would say "charity." Giving somebody's else's religious opinions a fair go inevitably involves you in acts of gentleness, of a cunning wit, those whimsical touches of a truly adept participant in dialogue that Eric himself embodied as a soul.

But what makes a great and good man, a talented and staggeringly learned man, who seemed to induce in those who knew his true worth a kind of reverence? Was it genes? They always play some unpredictable part (as we shall see), but then, Eric was very well aware that both his dear parents had heart problems and that he might be going to have them too, and such was not conducive to the equanimity we know him for. Was it social advantage? Hardly. Eric was born in 1933 into the Great Depression, and his mother and father lived in very straitened circumstances in Lancashire. He had barely a toy to play with. Once, much later in his years, when Birgitta gave him a teddy bear for fun, tears welled up in his eyes, and he remembered how he had lost a prized Dinkey toy down a Lancastrian drain. Was it then the chance at an early solid education? Not at all. It was a marvel he got right through school, a struggle at the end in any case, and he was the first in his family, they said, who ever made it that far. University life did not seem to beckon: it could have been that he was set for the ironmonger's shop to keep body and soul alive, or the services, because in 1953 he was part of the British Education Corps during the Korean War. (I always laboured under the illusion, by the way, after Eric said he had been in "the War" as "a sort of intelligence chap" that he had somehow been snaffled up by the army as a young prodigy at the end of World War II, and, apart from not wanting to ask him about his age, I never dared to get it all straight! It's funny, like an aura attached to a Great Gatsby, somehow he always lingered in me as the great Eric Sharpe).

But his were humble beginnings, and thank God for the Methodists - they gave him a residentship at the Hartley Victoria College, the University of Manchester. One couldn't say his family cultivated his spiritual sense; but in the bad lands of the Lancaster factories his heart was "strangely warmed" by the love between members of the local Methodist community - and by their music. At heart, we must understand, he always remained a Methodist (even though he was later to be an Anglican, and strong in Swedish Lutheran life). The hymn-singing Methodists were his real musical inspirers. But did this man, who played the flute to perfection, composed and arranged various musical pieces, who led or played a leading role in choirs around the world, have a music teacher? Not at all. He was self-taught from the grassroots, practising in factories, moving from chapel to chapel, and responding to a gift that was in himself, that expressed the yearnings of his soul. Perhaps his musical interest was affected by his genes: his father was a bandsman in India during the War. But if we can appropriate the terms of the German Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme, music is one vehicle by which the sometimes barely perceptible lightning-strikes of God sear the inner man - and he was attentive. He responded.

Hartley Victoria College was a place for training ministers, and there was thus in young Eric the intention and prospect of "taking up the cloth." But in a university all sorts of interesting avenues are waiting to be explored, and new choices to be made. When he found and contemplated the two greatest scholars at Manchester, on the one hand there was the fine Evangelical New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce (still with high profile on the reading lists of Moore College, Sydney), and

on the other a more adventurous, somewhat suspect liberal, S.G.F. Brandon, an ex-army chaplain who wondered whether Jesus might not have been connected with the revolutionary movements of his time, and ... and ... who knew all about the world's religions. Eric's instincts - or should we say the nudges of the divine? - were right. He went for Brandon, at the risky edge of things. And Brandon, after all, was most vocal among post-War British academics in arguing that Comparative Religion should be a necessary fixture in any university's curriculum. Eric saw his own vocation disclosing itself before him, not as a cleric, but as the academic bent on explaining to all the wonders of the wide religious world.

By 1957 Eric had finished his Masters degree, and had secured a government scholarship at the rather unripe age of 25 to take his doctorate - of all places in Sweden, at the University of Uppsala. Once again he had to make choices. The man dominating Comparative Religion there was a kind of aristocratic academic gadfly, who carried a whip around, applying it at every available opportunity to Attila, his horse, on rides in the fields near the campus. Not Eric's style. On the other was Bengt Sundkler, more spiritually rooted, and the humble yet brilliant historian of mission and church in Africa. Again Eric chose aright. Of course, it is not as if his time was without complications. Here we find that Eric was thrust into greatness. The government stipend was not that marvellous; more money had to be made. He had an incredible flare for languages and his Swedish was coming on very nicely indeed. Now, it so happened that there were all these wonderful Swedish scholars at hand just longing for someone to turn their books into English - Gerhardsson on how the disciples would have remembered Jesus' sayings like those of other rabbis, Gärtner on the Gospel of Thomas, and others - literati, even a writer on African church music. Music? Ah yes, Eric wasn't going to give it up. For him it was translations in the morning; doctoral work in the afternoon; and music at night. How idyllic, but how worrying to his thesis supervisor!

The biggest complication, though, - as most often the case - was a woman. After what were initially casual meetings, two hearts were throbbing, and at length we find them inseparable: Eric and the incomparable Birgitta Johannesson, daughter of a Swedish Lutheran pastor and one-time theological student, married in 1962, destined to be lifelong, loving companions, and - as we know - in sickness and in death. Birgitta was there when Eric hammered his thick Doctor of Theology thesis to the wall, as they all had to do after the manner of Luther's 95 theses, and there when he defended it verbally against chosen critics. The work had been about how the great Hindu tradition had been understood, and how it could be seen as tending through time towards the Christ, not to be destroyed, but fulfilled.

So, that is the less familiar part of his story. From then on he creeps up the academic ladder. They leave Sweden. There are appointments in Minnesota, Manchester, Lancaster, and some research work in India. He was walking with the great ones in his field. Once he helped the famed Mircea Eliade find his way out of a library; there was a man who was supposed to know all about sacred space - the axis mundi - and it was Eric who gave him the practical orientation he needed. Eric was also constantly collaborating with the well known Ninian Smart, publicizing the need to learn about religious diversity, and fostering the teaching of Religious Studies in schools. His closest friend was John Hinnells who was as intensely

interested in Zoroastrianism - the religion of the Magi - as Eric was in India. Books were being churned out. He helped solved legal cases about religion as a specialist witness. Indeed, he was already appearing as a special icon.

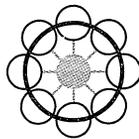
And so it was that in the far-off Antipodes, eyes fell upon his work and his interest to transfer his labours right here - to Sydney. His inclinations were correct; because we needed him; we have cherished him; our climate and the doctors were the best to look after his bodily needs. And why, above all, did interested Australian intellectuals look forward to his coming? By 1975 he had produced his finest book, *Comparative Religion: A History*. He had digested all the great scholars who had written about religions over the last two centuries, carefully and critically assessing their strengths and weaknesses. By the time of his arrival in 1977 he was already a captured National Treasure. Mind you, we almost lost him to the Swedes, in 1980, when he tested - as it were - the Arts Faculty Professorship in the History of Religions at Uppsala; but again he (and Birgitta) made the right decision, even if the long Northern winter was a big factor in the reckoning. That taste of Sweden facilitated a wonderful new book on Nobel Peace prize-winning bishop Nathan Söderblom, and also lovely little volume he did together with Birgitta on Thor Andrae, called *In the Garden Of Murtles* - on Sufism.

And so we remember him; full of knowledge coupled with wisdom, charity and a spiritual verve - the latter welling up in his good singing voice, in the flute as Birgitta (occasionally!) and others accompanied him on the piano at home, in the guidance he gave to the Sydney Swedish Singers, and at other cheerful celebrations. During the eighties and nineties we even had to wake up to him, as on the ABC he expounded the intricate relations between religion, society and culture. More latterly we might have read him in *The Good Weekend*, on the topic of saints - whom he has now gone to join.

If I may adapt, as seems suitable, from a very popular poem by Rudyard Kipling, introduced into Eric's very veins by his father,

The doorkeepers of Zion
I don't believe they stand
In helmet and whole armour
With halberds in their hand;
But they're others to rely on
To reveal her mysteries,
They rise like Sharpe, a scion,
Write books; and having spied on
All views that men have died on
In Zion they take their ease.

Farwell, our dear friend Eric. Farewell. In your life I alternated between calling you my boss and my mate, yet as even the ancient Sumerians knew, death levels us all. Farewell, mate. Godspeed as you embark on another, the greatest of adventures.
(Garry Trompf)



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