

Ursula King: A Passionate Life Member of the Study of Religions

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This collection of essays in honour of Professor Ursula King is a testament to the career of a truly inspirational and ground-breaking academic in the study of religions. Professor King is one of the few academics globally who can be said to have shaped a field of study and extended it into new fields of research and discovery. Her personal pathway into the study of religions, which began with her own reflective religious identity, quickly flourished and flowered into the life of a public scholar with a global awareness of the diversity of religions, and diversity within religions. She is a passionate advocate of communicating the great richness and range of religion to all ages. In her publications and lectures she continues to draw our attention to aspects of religions that have been outside the mainstream and often ignored in teaching. With the same passion she broke open the gate into the study of religions for aspects of gender in religion. Her publications on women and religion and feminist theology still inspire young female scholars all over the world who follow her into the field of the study of religions. Her support for young scholars (female and male), that has helped so many scholars who are now at the peak of their career, is extensive and impressive. She is truly an inspiration for us with her academic work and her enormous humanity.

The first and final sentences of Professor Ursula King's 2009 text, *The Search for Spirituality*, encapsulate her vision as scholar and passionate advocate of engaged personhood:

The great interest in spirituality today stems in part from the general awareness that we live on a planet torn apart by much suffering and

violence. Ever more people are in need of healing and in search of a more wholesome life. (ix)

Spirituality is not a permanent retreat from the world into the monastery, desert, or cave, not even into the silence of one's own heart, or the depths of one's mind. Rather, arising out of the midst of lived experience, spirituality implies the very point of entry into the fullness of life by giving meaning, value, and direction to all that humans do and are ... It is in the crucible of life that spirituality is born, emerges, and unfolds so that human life, and life on Earth can fully blossom and flourish. (195)

In a metaphor, that is realised in the academic journeys of her students and colleagues, we often find we are following in her footprints. Our scholarly pathways have been mapped by her explorations into the nature of diverse religious expressions and by her acute examination of the academic territories and tools of their study. It is illuminating to apply the notion of *parampara* (from the Sanskrit Indic notion of the succession of teachers and disciples), to significant academic teachers and their progeny; and it is particularly apposite for Professor King who has, throughout her career, nurtured her tutees and colleagues in their own career progression. Key features of this tutelage, exemplified widely in the essays contained within this volume, extend beyond the professional skills of academia, reflecting broader qualities of care, consideration, challenge, commitment and passion.

It is evidence of Ursula King's standing in the study of religions that this volume contains articles written by three past Presidents of the British Association for the Study of Religions and the 2018 President-elect. The BASR is an organisation that Professor King has herself presided over (1991-1994) and one which she has helped shape and nurture to become the preeminent professional body for the study of religions in the UK (she has previously served as Secretary, 1981-87, and Bulletin Editor, 1977-81). Moreover, her continued care for this organisation, engagement with its activities and support for its members is indicative of her approach to all aspects of her work in this field – specifically, a powerful, profound, personal and long-term commitment to all her projects and interests. It is, in part, for the long and significant relationship with the BASR that we elected to publish this *Festschrift* in the BASRs' own electronic journal, the *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions*.

While the BASR is a central theme to Ursula's professional academic life, and indeed to this volume, it is by no means a monolithic formation in either her influences, which have roots in multifarious and wide interests ranging globally across arts, cultures and sciences, or her academic outputs, which are equally broad and where her public engagement has a genuine and important impact outside academia. Another important theme in Ursula's formation came in the 5 years she spent in India - between 1965-70 - where she travelled widely, read extensively and studied vigorously, achieving an MA in Philosophy in 1969, and, incidentally, the Indian Philosophical Congress Gold Medal for the Best Candidate in the MA Examination in Philosophy, and University of Delhi

Thadani Memorial Prize for the Best Paper in Indian Philosophy. It is perhaps during this period that her profound interest in Indian Art began and ingrained her continued interest in artist-scholars such as the renowned Christian painter, Jyoti Sahi. Her broad interest in art and culture is equally evident in her recognition as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (1991). Ursula's period in India and her growing academic focus are part of a wider itinerant biography that has included stints of study at universities in Bonn, Munich, Paris, Tübingen and London (prior to 1965) and degrees, awards, fellowships, visiting professorships and professional posts (after 1970) from London, Oslo, Dayton Ohio, Cincinnati, Kentucky, Edinburgh, Cambridge, Leeds and Bristol. In 2013 she was elected Honorary Life Member of the European Association for the Study of Religions for her lifelong dedication of the study of religions.

Each of the editors of this volume are also personally indebted to Ursula King. We have each been profoundly influenced and inspired by her contributions to the study of religions in our own personal and professional life stories:

I (Dominic) first came across Ursula's work through an article on spirituality she published in the magazine *Resurgence*; shortly after I met with her first to interview for an MA in Religious Studies at Bristol University. I was working full time as a secondary school teacher and Ursula supported me to arrange remitted time for that post and negotiate afternoon and evening timetabling with the University to accomplish my studies. She supported my intention to undertake doctoral study in the US, but persuaded me to follow my PhD at Bristol, and I was won over by her personal commitment as supervisor, by her interest in my interests. Since that time she has followed my career with the same engagement and support and a personal interest in my life marked by genuine care. Thus Ursula was first an academic mentor and gradually became a colleague in the field of academic studies in religion and, at the same time, a long-term friend. This process of growing from mentee to colleague and friend is a theme in her biography of relationships and is evident in each of the narratives of the contributors to this volume.

Her interest in people and her support for younger scholars also characterises my relationship (Bettina) to her. In 2004 Ursula gave the keynote lecture at the annual conference of the British Association for the Study of Religions in Oxford at which we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the BASR. In her lecture she reflected on the BASR and its history but also on its future. I had just joined the BASR after having moved from Germany to the UK to take on a lectureship in study of religions at Oxford. Ursula's lecture, and meeting her at the conference, was a crucial moment for me. The academic world is, despite all progress, still a male dominated world. While I was taught by some female lecturers when I was a student back in Germany and later also had some female colleagues, we were usually only assistants to male professors and treated accordingly. To meet a senior woman who reflected on the past 50 years of the BASR and her contributions to its development was encouraging for my new academic home and also made me feel welcome. While I was not Ursula's student, I followed in her footprints nonetheless.

Professor King's interest in spirituality brings her close to the work of Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Centre whose current director I (Bettina) am. She served on the board of trustees of the Alister Hardy Research Centre (1992-1994) and later as trustee on the Alister Hardy Trust (2002-2010) and supported the Alister Hardy Trust even after she stepped down. She is a frequent speaker at seminars and other events organised by the Trust, the last one in 2017 in cooperation with the Teilhard society. While Alister Hardy, who was a marine biologist before he began working on religious experience, was perhaps more interested in quantitative data, Ursula looks for the individual voice. Common in both is the fascination of human experience with the divine or the numinous as Rudolf Otto, another important German scholar of religion, wrote. Hardy was also influenced by Teilhard de Chardin, the focus of Professor King's book *Spirit of Fire* (1996). She describes Teilhard as "a traveller, explorer, scientist, priest, and mystic", "an ardent seeker in love with all of life" (p. vii). While Professor King is foremost a scholar and teacher, the 'quest for meaning and fulfilment' (the subtitle of her book *The Search for Spirituality*, 2009) is also a constant in her life, as anyone who reads her popular publications can find out.

In a career spanning decades and continents it is only possible in a small volume to provide highlights or *vignettes* of the range of her academic roles, major projects, significant influences, or, even, key publications. Professor King's *oeuvre* is wide-ranging and extensive (as is evidenced by the publications list included within this volume). Among the important contributions she has made to the study of religions are her key roles in establishing the Community Religions Project at Leeds University, and founding the Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender at Bristol University. She has contributed to many television programmes and radio broadcasts and given public lectures throughout her career, including the 1996 Bampton Lectures at Oxford University. She has also been the keynote lecturer at multiple conferences across the world, from Japan to Sweden, from the Philippines to the USA. She is world renowned expert on religion, spirituality, gender and mysticism, recognised with honorary doctorates and visiting professorships and even past her retirement, holding current positions as Professor Emerita of Theology and Religious Studies and Senior Research Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies, at the University of Bristol and Professorial Research Associate, Centre for Gender and Religions Research, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Among her academic publications those on women and religion are the most important and, until today, perhaps the most influential items. Not only are they on reading lists for study of religions modules across the world, but they also inspire students to look at religions through a gendered perspective. The results are an increasing number of research projects that demonstrate that a gendered approach is needed for whatever topic studied. Again we cannot do justice here to more than a few examples of the over forty books, seventy journal articles and manifold encyclopaedia entries she has completed, other than to pick out a number of the ground-shaping texts she has authored and edited in this area. In 1987 Professor King edited a collection that ranks as one of the key early texts to provide a platform for women's voices in the

study of religions: *Women in the World's Religions, Past and Present*, (reprinted 1994). This was shortly followed, in 1989, by a further text indicating the direction of Professor Kings' profound interest in both women in religion, and the field of spirituality, *Women and Spirituality. Voices of Protest and Promise* (revised edition, 1993). Other publications on these themes followed, where we can see also the important trope of Professor King's support for other scholars, in her edited collection from 1994 *Feminist Theology from the Third World. A Reader*. She expresses her grasp of the field in her usual powerful language:

The new consciousness of women, the ability to articulate their pain, analyze their situation, express their protest, and seek radical change has given them the possibility of envisioning different ways of being for their communities and for themselves. Women have birthed a *new vision* nurturing hope, strength, and extraordinary courage. (18)

This excerpt also exemplifies an important aspect of Professor King's writing - she is a lucid and felicitous writer in the English language (though her first monograph was published in German and contained a translation of the Anti-Arian Treatises on the Trinity by Marius Victorinus from Latin into German). Two further texts, separated by ten years, are notable to include here, for they set out the boundaries, and investigated the novel approaches and means of expression, that a new gendered understanding, both historically and in contemporary academic analysis, that could be used in the study of religions: *Religion and Gender* (1995) and *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Crosscultural Approaches* (co-edited with Tina Beattie, 2005).

Ursula King's career includes, then, significant academic success and accolades, it has brought her to speak at many universities in different countries and continents. Moreover, she has published a significant range of books and articles outside academia for a wider audience. But what often is overlooked are her activities behind the curtain, for instance when working as consultant for the 'Gender and Religion' entries for the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (2005). It is thanks to her insistence - sometimes probably quite forceful - that the *Encyclopaedia* included not only many more entries on gender aspects of the study of religions but also enabled many more female scholars to contribute than the editors originally planned. The same "behind the curtain" activity of Professor King led to her involvement with the Women Scholars network of the International Association for History of Religion. Professor King is still part of the Steering Committee and has constantly supported contributors to this volume, Rosalind Hackett and Morny Joy when they founded the group in 2006.

In the year of Ursula King's eightieth birthday the editors and contributors to this volume seek to honour and recognise a career of significance and value, perhaps to remove the curtain from the full overview of the breadth and range of her contributions to the study of religions. And we do so with personal and scholarly perspectives, with critical and valedictory understanding, and with gratitude.

The chapters of this volume are varied in topic and focus, as befits Professor King's broad interests. In 'A Woman of Many Parts' Peggy Morgan reflects on a long history of personal connections with Professor King. She emphasises that 'one of the things [Professor King] appreciates and has appreciated about other scholars is the fullness of their human involvement in their subjects of study's life and work'. Moreover Peggy Morgan recognises Professor King's strength of will and determination, the necessity of being 'outspoken, critical and fierce at times' to fight injustice.

In 'Musing on a Muse: An Image Encounter' Kim Knott traces a history of her own intellectual development as a young scholar at the University of Leeds and the development of the Community Religions Project, Professor King's and her own involvement in establishing local, thematic studies of religion. Professor Knott identifies some core aspects of this project in its focus on religion and diversity, especially among British Hindus, but she also points towards aspects of academic research, notably collaborative research and the significance of public impact, which have developed in her own work in line with the wider scholarly community.

Sian Melvill Hawthorne's reflections are on 'Inhospitable Landscapes: Disciplinary Territories and the Feminist "Paradigm Shift"'. In this paper she identifies the seminal role of Ursula King's text *Religion and Gender* (1995) and highlights its significance for women scholars becoming critically aware of their own position in society, and structures of knowledge within it, as a foundation of a key project in academic feminism. But, she argues, this is a paradigm shift that is incomplete, in part, because of the 'exclusions that sole focus in gender risks' and she points toward a future that requires a 'work of dismantling and rebuilding ... anew'.

Morny Joy takes as her foci gender, postcolonialism and globalization, as key elements of Professor King's importance in the study of religions. In the paper 'Women's Journeys in the Study of Religion: Adventures in Gender, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism and Globalization' Morny Joy places Professor King alongside other significant women scholars who helped to shape contemporary understandings of religion from a feminist perspective, including Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether and Judith Plaskow.

Rosalind I.J. Hackett begins her paper with her memories of Professor King while an undergraduate student at the University of Leeds and with her appreciation of her passionate commitment to gender equality in academia. Reflecting on her memory of the IAHR Congress in Rome Rosalind Hackett describes it as a formative, historic experience when Professor King finally managed to combat the resistance against panels on gender, women and religion. Inspired by her pioneering work on gender and religion Rosalind Hackett presents in her paper 'Gender and Religion: Too Quiet a Field of Study?' a neglected field of study, the acoustic and auditory dimensions of gender differentiation, a field also close to Professor King's heart.

In 'Friendship, Faith and Feminism - how Ursula King taught me all I really need to know about being a good Theologian' Tina Beattie reflects on her

memory of Professor King at Bristol University and explains how her career was shaped by Professor King's ideas and visions, as well as her ongoing support. Tina Beattie describes Professor King as a midwife to a new generation of feminist theologians. She even positions her as 'one of the last generation of great European Catholic intellectuals' and 'a pioneer in new approaches to the study of religions and in the fields of feminist theology and gender studies'.

Brian Bocking who begins his contribution with his memory of Professor King while he was an MA student at Leeds focuses in his paper 'Mrs Pounds and Mrs Pfoundes: a Futuristic Historical Essay in Honour of Professor Ursula King' on digital humanities, a new area research. Inspired by Professor King he has selected two women as examples to reflect on the problem of researching traditionally under-represented figures, the wife (Rosa Alice Hill) and mother (Caroline Pounds) of the Irish Buddhist Charles Pfoundes. Brian Bocking uses these examples to highlight the significance of emerging technologies that might help us to understand even 'lost' figures of the history. His paper looks into the future and describes the possibility of new research methods but also a new field of research within the study of religions.

We want to add also our best wishes for her 80th birthday and many more years in good health.