

Brian Bocking: Making the Study of Religions

Oliver Scharbrodt

Abstract

Writing an academic biography of Brian Bocking is a formidable task for various reasons: first, there is the anticipation of a witty, self-ironic comment from him mocking the whole exercise itself and his own person at the same time: “Has my obituary already been written?” is the kind of comment one would expect from him. Second, there has always been something intimidating about Brian’s physical and intellectual stature. Third, in a professional context, Brian has always been very discreet about his private life, first and foremost about his own religious convictions. Brian has been part of a generation of Study of Religions scholars who clearly separate their religious beliefs or unbeliefs which they hold in private from their professional engagement in the academic study of religions.

Keywords: Brian Bocking, Study of Religions, Japanese Religions, Chinese Buddhism, Dhammaloka

By Way of Introduction

Writing an academic biography of Brian Bocking is a formidable task for various reasons: first, there is the anticipation of a witty, self-ironic comment from him mocking the whole exercise itself and his own person at the same time: “Has my obituary already been written?” is the kind of comment one would expect from him. Second, there has always been something intimidating about Brian’s physical and intellectual stature. I met him the very first time when we both started at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1999: I as an MA student on my year abroad and he as newly appointed Professor of the Study of Religions and Head of the - at that time - still very young department of the same name. At the departmental postgraduate research seminars, he asked the most difficult, challenging and scrutinising questions, reiterating and rephrasing his questions whenever he was not content with the answer. I remember how –as a PhD student later - I knocked on his office door with nervous inklings in order to get his signature for a fieldwork grant application he had to sign off as Head of Department. I knew it would not be easy to get his signature – and it was not. He asked dozens of questions about how I had arrived at the figures in my budget and why I thought that they were sufficient and why I was actually going to the Middle East to find books in the first place. Did not London have all the material I needed? It was very clear that Brian Bocking is not the kind of person who just rubberstamps documents with his signature but wants to know exactly under what he puts his name. Third, in a professional context, Brian has always been very discreet about his private life, first and foremost about his own religious convictions. Brian has been part of a generation of Study of Religions scholars who clearly separate their religious beliefs or unbeliefs which they hold in private from their professional engagement in the academic Study of Religions. When I was his teaching assistant in the first year introductory course to the Study of Religions at SOAS, he said in the very first lecture to students: “I don’t have any professional interest in your religious backgrounds and beliefs.” He wanted to make it absolutely clear that if they were ever tempted to talk about their own religions, they should not, because he did not want to know.

Brian grew up in the household of a United Reformed Church minister in an upper-middle class neighbourhood in North London. Despite the affluence of the congregation to which his father preached every Sunday, his family's household was – in Brian's own words – “poor but full of books”. When Brian finished school, he had the opportunity to study in Oxford or Cambridge – something his father very much wanted him to do – but Brian decided to take a rather unusual turn and to become a student at the first and that time only Religious Studies Department in the UK which Ninian Smart had established at Lancaster University in 1967. Brian studied under Ninian Smart who influenced an entire generation of British Religious Studies scholars with his own particular take on the phenomenology of religion and his efforts to emancipate Religious Studies from Theology. While Brian might have become more critical of some of the assumptions made in the phenomenological approach to religions, he always emphasised the need to separate Religious Studies from Theology and to resist attempts by theologians to appropriate Religious Studies as a theological sub-discipline, often saying: “A person who does not know the difference between Theology and Religious Studies is a theologian.” Brian became also critical of the term “Religious Studies” as suggesting that one needs to be religious in order to study it. Together with colleagues and students during his time at Bath Spa University, he looked for alternative names and developed the term “Study of Religions” (with religions in the plural) which now is the name of a number of departments on the British Isles with which he was associated.

After graduating in Lancaster in 1973, Brian completed his MA (1975) and PhD (1985) at the University of Leeds. Working initially with Michael Pye as his supervisor, Brian's PhD thesis topic very much reflected the textual and philosophical focus of Religious Studies at that time. His PhD was a translation and study of the *Zhong-lun* or *Middle Treatise*, an exposition of the idea of “emptiness” attributed to the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (ca. 150 – ca 250 CE) and written by the Chinese philosopher Kumarajiva (344-414 CE). Kumarajiva's translation-cum-exegesis is fundamental to the development of Madhyamika thought in Chinese Buddhism. Brian's study of this influential text was published in 1995 and makes an important contribution to understanding the transfer of Buddhist philosophy into China. In the years Brian was in Leeds, Religious Studies at the University also witnessed the beginning of the Community Religions Project in 1976 during which young scholars engaged with the changing religious demography and urban landscape of North English cities as the result of mass immigration from South Asia with Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities establishing themselves at the time. This pioneering project anticipated the anthropological and diasporic turn of the Study of Religions that would come to the fore in later years.

After a brief stint as a secondary school teacher, Brian began his academic career as Lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling in 1977. Brian always thrived in the role of an academic manager, “doing his magic”, as one colleague once put it, in creating something new. He established Religious Studies/Study of Religions departments at the University of Stirling (1977-1986) and Bath Spa University (1986-1999) where he also became Professor of the Study of Religions. He played an important role in consolidating the Study of Religions Department at SOAS during his tenure there (1999-2007) and established a new department at University College Cork in Ireland (2008-2015). However, his impact went beyond the successful establishment of departments at different universities in Britain and Ireland. He also shaped the institutions and organisation he was part of and never took existing practices or the overall institutional culture for granted and tried to fit in or to assimilate to it. He always challenged assumptions and particular ways of thinking and doing things, wherever he was. Being a “political animal”, Brian was also centrally involved in various academic professional associations. He served as president of the British Association of the Study of Religions from 1994 until 1997 and was one of the founder editors of its online journal *DISKUS* in 1993. For ten years, he was members of the executive committee of the International Association for

the History of Religions, first as its publication officer (2005-2010) and then as its treasurer (2010-2015). He was also member of the editorial board of *NUMEN: International Review for the History of Religions* from 2003 until 2008.

While I met Brian at SOAS for the first time and became less intimidated by him when I started working for him as his teaching assistant, I learned a lot about his academic and managerial skills when I joined the Study of Religions Department at University College Cork in 2008. Before his move to UCC, Brian was the head of one of the leading and strongest Study of Religions Department at one of the most prestigious universities in the UK. Most colleagues would probably be quite content with such a position and await retirement. But for Brian this was not enough, as he perhaps realised that he had exhausted his creative power at SOAS. Brian is not the type of person who withdraws at such a moment but seeks new challenges. At UCC, he not only introduced a new department to a university, as he had done before, but a new discipline to a whole country. The strength of the Study of Religions Department at UCC has been its clear vision and ethos, promoting the academic Study of Religions in a country and an academic culture where discourses about religions had traditionally been framed in theological terms. By playing a leading role in the establishment of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions, Brian also facilitated the creation of an organisational platform that brought scholars and academics from across Ireland together who had been engaged in the Study of Religions in various disciplines, whether Sociology, Anthropology, Geography or History, and connected them with the European and global Study of Religions community.

While working with Brian at UCC, I and my colleagues also had the privilege to experience and learn from his leadership style. If there is one word to describe his approach to running a department and academic management overall, then it is “common sense”. Brian’s leadership style is principled and yet pragmatic, combines intellectual and moral integrity with flexibility. He is structured and ambitious and can be forceful and determined not shying away from confrontations. At the same time, he is, inclusive and responsive, delegating tasks and genuinely open to suggestions and ideas. As mentioned above, Brian has been a “political animal” and engaged in the institutional politics of whichever university he worked for. However, he has been political not for his own benefit or to seek personal power but for the sake of his departments to empower the Study of Religions in the institutional context of higher education which has always tended to marginalise our subject area. He knows that in order to prevent such an institutional marginalisation, the Study of Religions needs to have a strong and loud voice in the university.

Areas of Research

Brian’s research trajectory reflects the evolution of the Study of Religions in the last three or four decades from historical and textual approaches to critical reflections on theoretical and methodological assumptions in the field and more contemporary research projects that are informed or based on ethnographic research. His research interests have also been shaped by the locations where he was working with his interest shifting towards Irish religious history and Irish-Buddhist relations after having moved to UCC. His research interests over the last 40 years have fallen into four main areas:

Chinese Madhyamika Buddhism

As mentioned above, his Leeds PhD provided the first translation and study of one of the formative texts of early Chinese Buddhism transferring philosophical discussions in early Buddhism to China (Bocking 1995). He subsequently received funding from the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Leverhulme Trust to work with Youxuan Wang on a first English translation and critical study of a companion text, the *Bai lun* or *Hundred Treatise*, attributed to Aryadeva and translated by Kumarajiva (Bocking and Wang 2006). The various publications that have come out of these research projects have provided important insights into the formative period of Chinese Buddhism

Japanese Religions

Brian also developed a particular interest in Japanese religions. He stayed at the University of Tsukuba in Japan from 1981 to 1982 and began to write on new religions and on Shinto, with AHRC funding for textual and fieldwork research which was published in Bocking (2001). This pioneering study traces the history and religious significance of a widespread Japanese scroll icon featuring three major shrine-divinities; Amaterasu, Hachiman and Kasuga, from the 13th century to the present day. This work was well received by reviewers for its distinctive contribution to the study of Japanese religions through iconology. Brian was invited to contribute the lead article on “Shinto” for the 2nd edition of *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Jones 2005) after having produced a dictionary on Shinto (Bocking 1996).

Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Study of Religions

Brian has also been engaged in theoretical and methodological debates in the Study of Religions publishing articles and giving conference papers which engage with topics in the teaching of religion in higher education in particular. For instance, one of Brian’s article discusses the question of religious experience (Bocking 2006) and engages with Robert Sharf’s argument that if a religious or mystical experience conveys any meaning at all, that meaning derives from shared public discourse, not from the experience as such. Sharf’s argument and Brian’s further discussion of it are meant to unsettle scholars who ground religious beliefs in religious experience, as some students and scholars still do to some extent up to now. In his article, Brian argues that rather than dismissing the notion of “religious experience” altogether, distinguishing between mystical experience and mystical teachings can make the notion of “experience” meaningful in studies of contemporary religions.

Dhammaloka and Irish-Buddhist Encounters

Brian’s move to Ireland triggered a new turn in his research interests. Given the particular orientation of the newly established Department at UCC with its focus on modern and contemporary religions, his research interests moved more decidedly to the contemporary world and gained a distinctive Irish flavour. At UCC, Brian found a new creative and managerial role establishing the

Department and its various programmes, but in the first year or so, it seemed he was looking for a research project. He was part of a global research project on scientists' attitudes towards religion as the Irish partner and also gave a paper at the New Religious Movements conference in Maynooth in 2009 on Catholicism as a new religious movement which – as one would expect – received rather mixed responses.

And along came Dhammaloka...

Together with Alicia M Turner of York University in Toronto and Laurence Cox of the National University of Ireland Maynooth, Brian “discovered” the Buddhist convert U Dhammaloka (ca. 1856 – ca. 1914), the working-class, Dublin-born Irishman who was probably the first Western convert to Buddhism who was also ordained as a monk and was heavily involved in anti-imperial and anti-missionary activism in South East Asia, Burma in particular. A bit of an “international man of mystery”, Dhammaloka challenges the hitherto known history of Western Buddhism which has been seen as being initially a movement of educated, middle-class Englishmen and also illustrates the complex religious history of Ireland outside of Christianity with many Irish engaging with and being involved in Asian religions in the context of the British Empire. There has been quite a lot of excitement, energy and publicity around this collaborative research project with a number of conferences, workshops and outreach events organised, research grants received from the Dhammakaya Trust and the Irish Research Council, a feature film planned and several publications coming out such as two special editions of *Contemporary Buddhism* (Turner, Cox and Bocking 2010; Bocking, Choempolpaisal, Cox and Turner 2013), an edited volume (Turner, Cox, Choempolpaisal and Bocking 2014) and a multi-authored book on Dhammaloka currently written. In a sense, Brian turned quite native while researching Dhammaloka, engaging – as many Irish do – in genealogical research to solve the mystery of who Dhammaloka actually was and establishing many other curious family connections. For instance, he discovered another Irish Buddhist convert, Captain Charles Pfoundes (1840-1907) from Co. Waterford, who lived in Japan for many years and established the first Buddhist mission to the West in London in 1891-92.

Conclusion – Always in the Making

While this piece is most certainly not meant to be an obituary, there is however a sense of loss in these lines: that after his retirement, no Study of Religions department will benefit from Brian's experience and wisdom, wit and irony, insight, common sense and “skilful means” as an academic manager. As it seems, the (ex-?)workaholic Brian (first emails at 6:00 in the morning, the last often at 11:00 at night) takes his retirement very seriously. Having always been an avid gardener, he now fully dedicates his time and energy to his garden (which is a serious garden consisting of different beds and greenhouses and must be ever expanding). Being myself now in position of an academic manager, running a research centre and various projects, responding to the increasing pressure on the higher education sector in the UK and dealing with the various egos and personalities that inhabit academia, I often wonder: what would Brian do in this situation?

The public pressure on higher education to become ever more transparent and accountable, the numerous evaluation procedures increasing our administrative burden, the mounting financial pressure on academics in times of austerity, the declining student numbers and the closure and merger of Study of Religions departments are all realities. But what Brian never did is to give up or withdraw, to mourn the loss of academic freedom or to engage in futile ideological battles. He has

always responded to the various institutional challenges and resisted the academic and institutional marginalisation of the Study of Religions in pro-active manner. Brian addressed university politics head-on to ensure the recognition and place of the Study of Religions in higher education. As he once said, part of the modern condition is the constant possibility and need to reinvent oneself, as a person, a scholar, a discipline, a department or a university. Brian has understood the Study of Religions as a field that should matter and be relevant to society. He has also responded most openly to the rise of new research agendas, be they informed by anthropological research, post-modern philosophy or feminist theory. While the new research agendas and approaches in the contemporary Study of Religions might challenge many of Brian's own assumptions what our field should be, he would be, I think, the first to say that the Study of Religions – more than other academic field – is itinerate, self-reflective and processual and always in the making.

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