

## Santa Fe

### "St. John's College, a Bastion of the West, Makes Room for the Classics of the East"

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Faculty Members at St. John's College like to talk about the "great conversation" of Western civilization. It's a discussion that has unfolded over centuries: Plato speaks to Homer, Aristotle to Plato, Dante to Aquinas, Machiavelli to all of them. Since 1937, St. John's which has campuses here and in Annapolis, Md. has based its undergraduate curriculum on the works of such authors, sealing its reputation as "the great books college."

In the past few years, though, a growing circle of faculty members here has become interested in an other conversation--the intellectual discourse of the East. Five years ago, the Santa Fe campus began offering what it believes is the nation's only master's degree program on great books of the East. Those works, too, span centuries: Indian epic poets speak to Buddhist scripture writers, whose work travels to China, breaking into a dialogue between Confucianists and Taoists.

That such a program would be offered at a college best known as a bastion of Western culture isn't really that much of a stretch, says Krishnan Venkatesh, the program's archon (Greek for leader) and a tutor, as faculty members here are known.

"If there's one thing we're good at, it's our resourcefulness in reading books," he says.

Just don't call the program multicultural. Scholars at this adobestyle campus near the snow covered Sangre de Cristo Mountains still cringe when they hear that word. If anything, they see the program as the antithesis of the usual attempts to broaden curricula to satisfy various groups demanding change.

Its focus is an intense study of important Eastern texts, such as the Rig Veda, a collection of sacred Hindu hymns; the Upanishads, Hindu religious and philosophical literature; the Analects of Confucius; and the Tao Teh Ching, a group of poems by Lao-tzu devoted to following the Tao, or "the way," of all things. Students also learn enough Sanskrit or Chinese to read passages in their original language.

Back in 1992, when a pilot version of the program began, St. John's announced it was undertaking "a serious study of the classic texts of the East, rather than indulging in popularized interpretations of certain aspects of Eastern culture." It hoped that the program would serve as a model for colleges "embroiled in the push for 'multiculturalism.'"

Mr. Venkatesh elaborates: "The reason we have a Western books curriculum is that there's a coherent and developed conversation going on. When Lao-tzu is writing, he's addressing someone else. We have to respect the integrity of the conversation."

"Dropping the Bhagavad Gita into the undergraduate seminar," says James Carey, dean here and one of the program's founders, "would be tokenism."

The undergraduate program at St. John's remains firmly Western (as does its master's program in liberal arts, offered on both campuses). It has retained its idiosyncrasies--no majors, no departments, and no faculty ranks beyond "tutor." All students read the same books in seminars, so that, as one scholar puts it, "there's no need to identify St. Paul."

Still, it was inevitable that the Eastern Classics program would influence campus culture, even if in subtle ways. Because the program has no separate faculty, scholars who volunteer to teach in it must bone up on Eastern texts and languages, on their own or in the faculty study groups that already existed at St. John's. About 10 of the campus's 60 faculty members teach in the program each year, and as many as one third have participated since it began.

Scholars here routinely teach outside their fields, so it wasn't unusual for Linda Wiener, an entomologist who became interested in Chinese literature, to offer a preceptorial on early Taoist writings.

What is new is a shifting of scholarly interests on the part of some faculty members. "The Eastern Classics program has diversified our interests," says Ralph Swentzell, one of two faculty leaders of the program's seminar. "I'm not as concerned about the ins and outs of Plato versus Aristotle. I'm more concerned about Confucius versus the Taoists."

Then there is the question of whether there are great books of the West, great books of the East, or only great books.

It's a question Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoist philosophy, might have asked. A Chinese sage believed to have lived more than 2,500 years ago, Lao-tzu, whose name means "old master," wrote of the struggle to lead a balanced existence in a world of conflicting forces. His classic *Tao Teh Ching* is the subject of this evening's seminar.

A student opens the class by posing a few questions: What is the nature of the Tao? (It's pronounced "dow.") How do we interpret the Tao, and how does it affect us, if at all?

The questions lead to comments that lead to more questions that lead to more comments.

A few students discuss various translations of certain words, and then the group works through lines like these: "The Tao is an empty bowl, / Which in being can never be filled up." And: "Heaviness is the root of lightness. / Serenity is the master of restlessness."

The Tao, one student says, "is empty, like a bowl. But it can also be useful, like a bowl." Another says: "I never took the Tao to mean being or not being, but the merging of the two."  
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A heated discussion takes place over a passage in which Lao-tzu advocates governing by

Emptying the heart of desires,  
Filling the belly with food,  
Weakening the ambitions,  
Toughening the bones.

Students wonder, Did the author mean that a leader should empower his people or subjugate them? Students do most of the talking, as is customary here. (They also address one another formally in class. The gentility is quaintly jarring at first, when a student says he "liked Miss Hadley's suggestion.") The

program has 18 students, but the faculty recently voted to expand it. Some of its students, like Michael DiMezza, hold bachelor's degrees from St. John's. "I thought once we got out of Greece, the world would be stood on its head," he says. "In fact, I found that the Hindus are probably the underpinning of the Western tradition." The teaching approach defuses the kind of debate that might take place on other campuses," says Homayoon Sepasi, another student. "You learn that it's not either/or. One does not relinquish critical thinking because one is reading a book in another tradition."

A discussion with the campus's dean and president about whether certain ideas are unique to the East or West becomes itself a kind of mini-seminar: Questions matter as much as answers. "We're leaving open the question of whether both cultures are even asking the same questions," says John Agresto, the president. (As acting and deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities in the 1980s, Mr. Agresto relished a good scholarly skirmish. He still does.)

Mr. Carey compares Hindu notions of man as a herd animal governed by caste with Aristotle's notion of man as a political animal. The two then discuss Western efforts to adjudicate faith and reason.

Mr. Agresto: "I think the central Western idea is equality."

Mr. Carey: "But it's false that Eastern thought is intuitive or mystic, and that Western thought is rational." The Indian scholar Nagarjuna, for example, was "a ferocious logician."

Mr. Agresto: "But do Aristotle and the Hindus view the idea of soul in the same way?"

Eastern versus Western ideas? "Ah, that's a huge question," Harvey Flaumenhaft, dean on the Annapolis campus, says later by telephone. And a good reason, he says, to have an Eastern Classics program even though he opposed creating it. He worried that it could spread the faculty too thin and blur the college's mission. "The question isn't whether the program is a good thing, but whether it's a good thing for us to be doing," says the dean, who himself has scholarly interests in Chinese culture. Many people expect the undergraduate curriculum to remain firmly rooted in the West, for this reason: There is only so much time to read so many books.

"What can you do well in the time you have?" says David Levine, director of the graduate institute. "The West is what most students have grown up with so that's the place to begin. But in principle, the great books are not Eastern or Western."