

Response to Question on Oriental Philosophy

Dr. Grams - MLA - 520

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Question selected : What have I learned from this course?

This course has provided me with a valuable key to unlocking the Orient. Although still just a tourist in a foreign country, I now have a road map and some vocabulary. I have been missing out on so much for years!

I had a roommate once who was Taiwanese and, like me, was living in Vienna, Austria. She didn't know English and I certainly didn't know Chinese, so we had to do our best to communicate in German. We both remained friendly but frustrated after months together, each of us trying to figure out what the other person was thinking or saying.

If I had known more about Confucianism then, I might have understood why there was such a gulf between us. She must have been constantly disappointed that I did not practice any of the social conventions she knew, and I was peeved that she was so unwilling to try new things. I do have a deeper respect for the sort of social order that Confucius recommended. I think American culture suffers now from a lack of or a confusion about etiquette. Perhaps the pendulum will start to swing the other way.

I had a Chinese student in my ESL (English as a Second Language) class in Roanoke, Virginia. When I asked him about his religion he looked puzzled and then tried to explain. He was a Confucian, but also a Buddhist. Then he added Taoism to his list. I wondered why he couldn't make up his mind. Now I realize that he, and many other Chinese, incorporate several religions or philosophies into their day-to-day lives. What a contrast to the Americans! So often we are like hypocrites, for we loudly proclaim our

church "membership" while demonstrating by our extravagances that we worship materialism.

The Vietnamese students in my ESL class were refugees, among the last wave to leave Vietnam in the early nineties. I was painfully aware of the ways in which their native culture had been disrupted, so I didn't probe too much with questions about religion. I thought that the brightest students would find success in the U.S., but I was concerned for the students who could not do well academically. Poor verbal skills = Poor English = minimum wage jobs and disillusionment with life in the USA.

The school system in Roanoke was ill prepared to cope with a significant number of non-English speaking refugees. There was plenty of hype about preparing students to compete in a world economy, but foreign languages were the step-child of every high school, and cultural awareness and diversity were meaningless words with no substance. As the only ESL teacher in the school, I felt responsible for everything that happened to these predominantly Vietnamese students, and most of the faculty expected me to take such responsibility, too. I remember a driver's education teacher who sought me out one afternoon to complain about one of **my** students who had offered him a bribe to pass his driving exam. I suppose that the teacher needed to take out his frustration on someone. Imagine the frustration that the boy felt, coming to an American high school at age seventeen with no English, one parent, poor academic skills, and the urgent necessity of getting a driver's license. To add to the problem, other students at the school were grouped into gangs, and one of these gangs was known to pick fights with the Vietnamese. There was a day when one of my German students had to warn me that I should lock my classroom door and keep the ESL class inside for the next hour, for there

was a group of guys coming to “get the chinks.” The saddest thing was the school’s total lack of preparedness in dealing with cultural diversity and tolerance. I wish that teachers and administrators could study oriental philosophy, too.

We need to build bridges between what is familiar and what is unknown. I know how uncomfortable I feel in a foreign country or in the midst of people who think differently from me. I went to a meeting of civil war enthusiasts and was dismayed to find out that the speakers were the sort who wave confederate flags, and perhaps even wear white sheets. I felt really uncomfortable there because I felt so different and so out of place. I’m not sure that I would have ever felt comfortable in that group of rebels. It wasn’t a problem of not knowing enough about their religious and philosophic views - I knew them too well!

One of the lessons which has sunk in for me this semester is the realization that Christianity has evolved so drastically over the years that it is often hard to find Christ in it. I have enjoyed reading about each religion and its historical development. Hinduism developed its caste system, Confucianism became more and more rigid and complicated, and religions such as Taoism seem have come into being primarily as a reaction to the extremes in another.

I am fascinated to notice how much influence Buddhism and Taoism are having in psychology and therapy. I think that Christianity in all its forms is not meeting the needs of its followers in this confusing world, and the Eastern philosophies seem to offer some much needed wisdom. Many churches are trying to bring order out of the chaos by emphasizing rules and laws, and rights and wrongs, but many of us who are hurting need a

more reasonable approach. I suppose I am saying that I think that the Eastern religions offer an escape from the dualism in which we've become so mired in the West.

The main point I should make about what I have learned in this course, though, is to stress how I have stretched intellectually and spiritually. I often go away from church feeling a bit bored and dissatisfied with the sermon or the class, perhaps because there isn't anything being said which challenges me to dig deep and ponder what I really believe. Church should do more than just indoctrinate. This class has given me substantial food for thought and has forced me to persist in putting vague thoughts into words and sentences. It has been well worth the challenge.

*A pleasant essay - with
some poignant anecdotes &
well-made points.*

JS