

CIIS and American Higher Education

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Abstract: In this article a brief history of the California Institute of Integral Studies and its predecessor institution, the American Academy of Asian Studies is discussed, and several key founding figures of both institutions are introduced. It is argued that the role these unique institutions of higher learning have played have been crucial, initially in the cultural life of San Francisco Bay Area and the social and cultural movements it inspired, and currently in the context of the role that an integral, whole-person oriented education plays in higher education.

Keywords: American Academy of Asian Studies, California Institute of Integral Studies, Haridas Chaudhuri, Louis Gainsborough, Paul Herman, higher education, integral education, San Francisco Renaissance, Alan Watts.

Introduction

The story of the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) serves as a living case study—a work in progress that documents that a university can maintain academic credibility and institutional accreditation while challenging the prevailing dualistic educational model. Moreover, it demonstrates that an institution can even thrive in this progressive approach to higher education. CIIS faculty members and students are drawn to, and remain at, CIIS because of its unique pioneering model of integral education.

Louis Gainsborough and the American Academy of Asian Studies

The story of CIIS begins in 1951 with the founding of the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco by Louis Gainsborough and the arrival of two of its most prominent professors: Alan Watts and Haridas Chaudhuri.

Louis Gainsborough, a business entrepreneur and importer, traveled throughout Asia and became convinced that world peace depended upon an enduring and collaborative relationship between the East and the West. He was so moved by the embodied peace message of Mahatma Gandhi that he produced a documentary film featuring rare original footage of Gandhi. In 1957, on the day following his second inauguration, President Dwight Eisenhower screened

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Gainsborough's film at the White House with Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister of India, and Gainsborough present.

Recognizing that education was critical in creating an enduring East/West relationship, Gainsborough founded the first graduate school in the United States exclusively devoted to a study of Asia—the American Academy of Asian Studies. Gainsborough's launching of the Academy was a courageous act because of the contentious anti-Asian sentiment in the US: in 1951, the United States was still in the wake of its war with Japan and it was actively engaged in the Korean conflict. Nonetheless, Gainsborough persevered in his vision and his Academy not only led to the creation of CIIS later in 1968, but it also contributed much to shaping the San Francisco cultural milieu of the 1950s and 60s. Over the years, the intersection of the Academy, CIIS, and San Francisco Renaissance significantly influenced the integration of Eastern and Western wisdom traditions throughout the US and the Western world.

Alan Watts

In 1951, Alan Watts (1915-1973) arrived at the Academy. By then, Watts had published eight (of his eventual twenty-two) books as well as many essays on Eastern religious and spiritual traditions, particularly Zen Buddhism. He was established as one of the leading writers and teachers of Eastern mysticism. Through his scholarly reputation and personal connections, Watts positioned the Academy to be a principal meeting place for artists, writers, teachers, activists, and practitioners of the emerging counter-cultural movement of the San Francisco Renaissance.

As Monica Furlong (1986) noted in her biography of Watts, the counter-culture movement in San Francisco with its new ways of thinking contributed immensely not only to “normalizing” Eastern religious and spiritual practices in the US; but it also provided a catalyst for the national, and often international, 1960's movements in civil rights, anti-war, environment, and transpersonal psychology. In his autobiography, *In My Own Way*, Watts (1972/2001), looking back at the 1960s, extensively and convincingly documented that “The American Academy of Asian Studies was one of the principal roots of what later came to be known, in the early sixties, as the San Francisco Renaissance...” (p. 232).

Watts' account of the spirited debates among the founders of the Academy sheds light on the early evolution of humanistic and transpersonal psychology during this period in the United States. Some founders of the Academy (particularly Gainsborough) wanted the Academy to offer studies of Asian culture to prepare people to engage in business in Asia while others (Watts and Chaudhuri among them) “were concerned with the practical transformation of human consciousness...” (Watts, 1972/2001, p. 234). Watts indicated that the latter group prevailed, and the Academy cultivated “the actual living out of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist ways of life at the level of high mysticism: a concern repugnant to academics and contemptible to businessmen, threatening to Jews and Christians, and irrational to most scientists” (Watts, 1972/2001, p. 234).

Watts played a critical role in developing the Academy's weekly colloquia that attracted many of San Francisco's leading artists, writers, psychotherapists, and scholars as well as visiting guests like D.T. Suzuki.

In these dialogues, as Watts pointed out, the participants of the colloquia mixed rather than mixed-up the disciplines. Watts recalled with heartfelt appreciation his many dialogues with Chaudhuri who with “his gentle humor and learned mind made him a wonderful partner in debate, so that we could argue endlessly without losing tempers” (p. 235). The students who attended these colloquia included Michael Murphy and Richard Price who later established the Esalen Institute at Big Sur in 1962, as well as Gary Snyder, who became a noted poet, professor of literature, and the inspiration for the character “Japhy Ryder,” the Buddhist beatnik hero, in Jack Kerouac’s (1958) *The Dharma Bums*, the classic novel on the San Francisco Renaissance.

In 1961, Watts published his views on the integration of Eastern wisdom traditions and Western psychology in his book *Psychotherapy East and West* (Watts, 1961/1975). By the end of the 1960s, Watts would comment on the emerging themes of his day—themes that were swirling around the Academy and the soon-to-be California Institute of Asian Studies:

I have the impression that the psychiatric world has opened up to the possibility that there are more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in its philosophy... The field is giving way to movements and techniques increasingly free from the tacit metaphysics of nineteenth-century mechanism: [these include] Humanistic Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology, Gestalt Therapy, Transactional Psychology, Encounter Therapy, Psycho Synthesis, ... Bioenergetics, and a dozen more interesting approaches with awkward names. (Watts, 1961, p. 337)

Watts’ brilliance and charisma brought attention to the American Academy of Asian Studies, the predecessor of CIIS. Moreover, Watts greatly influenced Chaudhuri and their mutual colleagues in setting the agenda for the founding vision of CIIS. Years after leaving the Academy, Watts acknowledged the success of Chaudhuri in continuing the work they had begun at the Academy twenty years earlier. He wrote: “Haridas Chaudhuri went off on his own and replaced it [the Academy] with the California Academy [sic] of Asian Studies, which is where something of the original tradition of the work is now alive and kicking quite interestingly” (Watts, 1972/2001, p. 277).

Haridas Chaudhuri

In 1949, Haridas Chaudhuri (1913-1975) earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Calcutta University, submitting a dissertation on the integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. Chaudhuri was recognized as the leading scholar and commentator on the extensive works of Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) even by Aurobindo himself; and he was appointed to the Academy, the predecessor of CIIS, to teach courses on the works of Aurobindo within the context of the panoramic landscape of Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions. Chaudhuri included many of the original educational themes of the Academy as he developed the California Institute of Asian Studies (later changed to Integral). In 1981, the Institute was granted regional accreditation which meant that the Institute’s students would be eligible for federally funded financial aid and the institute was a member of the national community of colleges and universities. Throughout his years preparing the Institute for accreditation, he never lost sight of the urgent need in higher education for integral education: he wrote “The educational system, as it operates today, does not

take into account the whole person, nor does it take into account the whole world” (Chaudhuri, 1977, p. 78).

Chaudhuri (1977) maintained that Aurobindo provided a complete art of integral living because his work points the way to dynamic integration of the material and spiritual values of life. It is a call to the reconstruction of human life and society on the basis of abiding spiritual values (pp. 135-136). Chaudhuri’s definition of the “art of integral living” as “the dynamic integration of the material and spiritual values of life” is especially relevant to our assertion today that higher education needs to develop an integral approach to education. Chaudhuri’s assessment of the state of higher education is as pertinent today as it was a half century ago: it continues to influence integral educational programs as evidenced by Ken Wilber’s (2006) aspiration for his Integral University that it “cultivate body, mind, and spirit in self, culture, and nature” (p. 32).

In *The Evolution of Integral Consciousness*, Chaudhuri (1977) clearly stated the need for higher education to include a holistic view of the human being:

It is important to have a comprehensive, holistic, integrated view of humanity. The integral view of ... [humanity] implies that no individual is a separate self-existent entity. Just as the different elements of our nature—body, mind, spirit—are interrelated aspects, in the same way, every individual is a factor in a social continuum... Individuality conceived as a self-existent atom is an abstraction of our mind; it does not exist. Nobody lives by himself. Human beings become more and more human through social interrelations, interactions. (p. 74)

Chaudhuri’s vision of integral education, like that of Alan Watts, was based on connecting the cultural traditions of the East and the West:

The integral world view and integral thinking are in truth two sides of the same coin The method of integral thinking represents a dynamic integration of the scientific, phenomenological and dialectical methods of the West and the self-analytical, psycho-integrative, nondual values of the East. (Chaudhuri, 1977, p. 85)

Like Gainsborough, Chaudhuri was convinced that global peace depended upon profound connection between the East and West and he recognized the need to include Indian core values in Western education. To implement this vision, Chaudhuri and his colleagues developed a new vision of theory and practice in psychology by integrating Aurobindo’s psycho-spiritual perspective and integral method with the new and growing academic and professional field of counseling psychology. Integral counseling psychology has been central to the educational mission of CIIS because it blends what Chaudhuri considered the best in the East with the best in the West. Brendan Collins, a CIIS professor who studied with Chaudhuri, recalls that Chaudhuri often said that he thought that spirituality would return to the West not through philosophy or religion, but through psychology.

Unfortunately, Chaudhuri's formulation of a unique program in integral counseling psychology was cut short by his untimely death in 1975; however, the initiative was completed by Paul Herman, Professor of Psychology who began teaching at the Institute in 1969.

Paul Herman

In 1973 Paul Herman designed the Institute's first independent program—a graduate degree in integral psychology that was based on his and Chaudhuri's collaborative vision. He appropriately entitled the new program "Integral Counseling Psychology." To ensure the long term viability of the new program, Herman (1972) insisted that it be clinically professional and state credentialed in order to prepare students for employment in various counseling sub-specialties, such as developmental, vocational, rehabilitation, mental health, marriage and family, and transpersonal and yoga counseling. The degree program was designed to fulfill the suggested education and training standards of professional counseling and psychological associations, both state and national, and to profit by the close collaboration of specialty groups in humanistic and transpersonal psychology as well as those concerned with innovations in parapsychology and healing.

The Integral Counseling Psychology (ICP) degree was launched in September of 1973. In his announcement, Herman credited Chaudhuri for the original concept of the program stating that the degree was developed according to the integral view of the late Haridas Chaudhuri in including the major spiritual traditions of East and West, recent cultural and social science research, and the writings of leading humanistic and transpersonal psychologists. Writing ten years later, Herman reiterated his founding vision for the program. In a paper published in 1983, Herman defined Integral Psychology as:

... an emergent East-West study of the human psyche. It draws upon the findings of both Western depth psychology, and ancient Eastern teachings and yogas, to express a whole, unfragmented view of human nature which does not remain merely theoretical, but also functions to resolve human conflicts and open the way toward activating high levels of potential ... it includes the whole range from protohuman awareness to expansive transcendent experience. (Herman, 1983, p. 95)

In that same paper, Herman echoed Gainsborough's anticipation that education could be a principal catalyst for world peace:

Integral psychology, as a science of the psyche or soul, concerns itself with whole potential of human consciousness. Thus it looks forward to a full transformation of the manifest cosmos, including humankind, in the evolutionary future. All human beings may assist in cosmic evolution, as well as help resolve personal, social, national, and international conflicts, by centering consciousness at the innermost core of the being until its guidance and energy are activated. (Herman, 1983, p. 1)

By insisting at the outset that the program would only accept and graduate students who could demonstrate competence in both the classroom and the counseling center, Herman assured that the program would not only meet the standards of accreditation but also that its graduates would

find professional acceptance. After meticulously grounding the program in the requirements of established programs in counseling psychology, Herman integrated Eastern perspectives into the program. In the end, the program had more required courses than that of traditional counseling psychology programs. To this day the Integral Counseling Psychology Program is one of the most sought after courses of study at CIIS.

Conclusion

Huston Smith, revered historian of religious and spiritual movements, commended CIIS for its role in advancing US higher education:

In the course of decades, American higher education has created tradition-bound ruts and it works in those ruts. Consequently, it is vitally important that mainline universities be complemented by alternative programs that are not stuck in those ruts. CIIS is the best of these alternative programs that I know of. (Smith, n.d.)

We are blessed to be living in an age in which unprecedented global and cultural shifts are enabling us to get beyond our many “tradition-bound ruts” in higher education that have held us in place since the seventeenth century. While many faculty members and administrators may not have changed their educational visions, the students have. This change is evident in the extensive longitudinal research on university students and their spirituality that is being conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (UCLA, 2006). The surveys reveal that the fastest growing group of university students in the US is those who identify themselves as spiritual non-religious. Fortunately, CIIS is not alone in meeting the needs of the changing student population. Higher education currently faces challenges not only in supporting curricular changes to include, interdisciplinary, integrative, and transpersonal studies but also supporting the pedagogical shifts and the life style changes that reflect a holistic worldview.

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