

What is the School of Economic Science (SES)?

The School of Economic Science was founded in 1938. The core courses offered by the School are in Philosophy and Economics. Some branches of the School are called the School of Philosophy or the School of Practical Philosophy. The School does not see itself as a religion, but would consider itself a “new spiritual movement”.

The School's teachings are primarily based on Advaita Vedanta, an Indian soteriological philosophy. Advaita Vedanta holds a non-dualist, or monist, metaphysical position, i.e. that the ultimate essence of each individual self (*Ataman* in Sanskrit) and the Universal, Transcendent Self (*Brahman* in Sanskrit) are one and the same. The school also believes that Advaita underlies the prominent Western philosophical teachings, and is the essence of Christian teaching.

Where are they found?

Philosophy courses are offered in every region of England and Scotland; the head office is in London. Associated Schools are found in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, South Africa, South America, Trinidad and the United States.

In 1975, a number of parents in the School founded the St James Independent Schools for children. Junior schools for both boys and girls, and the senior girls' school are located in London; the senior boys' school is in Twickenham, Middlesex. The School has organised a national cultural event called “Art in Action” at Waterperry in Oxfordshire for several years. This is a four-day public event which was attended by about 25,000 visitors in the past few years.

What do they believe?

The School believes in a Supreme Being as the ultimate source of creation. Additionally, there is an “infinite consciousness” which permeates and sustains the world. There is therefore a belief in an essential unity of all beings by virtue of a common origin and essence of consciousness. Following from these beliefs is the idea that there is a framework of “Natural Law” which governs all creation. Mankind has an obligation to learn and practice activities that work with the “Natural Law” for the mutual welfare of all beings.

The School teaches that there is a common thread of ultimate Truth running through all great teachings and philosophies of the world. The School encourages a moral base in truth, humility and service to the community. There are no restrictions on attendance at the School on grounds of religious or cultural background or absence of any established beliefs.

How are these beliefs introduced?

The early courses in Philosophy introduce students gradually to the ideas advocated by the School. In the introductory and early terms the courses offered are fairly broad and general. The Eastern connection is not particularly emphasised and materials are drawn from a variety of sources. Later, there is a focus on Eastern texts, particularly the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. The study of Sanskrit is then introduced so that these texts can be read in their original language.

As part of the introductory course, students are given a simple exercise to strengthen attention and awareness through connecting with the senses. After about 18 months of attendance, continuing students are invited to be initiated into a mantra form of meditation. After about three years, this becomes a prerequisite to moving forward with their studies. The meditation used by the School is in the tradition of Shankaracharya, the 8th century exponent of Advaita Vedanta. For long-term students, two sessions of formal meditation (one in the morning and one in the evening) are reinforced by a practice of “falling still” between actions, and dedicating every activity to the Supreme Being and increasing self awareness.

Students who continue in the School for about four years are introduced to the concept of “Measure”. This is based upon the view that the “Natural Law” prescribes a framework of regulations necessary to achieve a happy and healthy life. The framework governs such matters as appropriate food and appropriate periods for physical work, mental work, spiritual work, and sleep (with regard to the individual's constitution and other circumstances).

Where do their ideas come from?

The School was originally founded by a small group of people wishing to explore questions relating to economic justice against the background of the economic depression of the early 1930s. They were interested in the ideas of Henry George, an American economist who advocated the taxation of unearned gains arising from land values as a fairer tax than one based on earned income.

The group was led by the barrister Mr. Leon MacLaren with the support of his father, the then Labour MP Andrew MacLaren. The ideas of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky influenced the School's early teachings. After meeting the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in London during the early 1960s, Leon MacLaren travelled to India. Then in the ensuing years of his life he received guidance from Shri Shantananda Saraswati, a spiritual leader in the Advaita Vedanta tradition. Study material includes not only the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads of Indian origin, but also the Bible, Plato, the teachings of the leading Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, and others. However, Advaita Vedanta has become the guiding philosophy of the School and the “lens” through which all texts are read.

How do they live?

Some time after being initiated into meditation, students are encouraged to live according to the concept of “Measure”: rising early, meditating regularly and finding a balance between worldly, reflective and spiritual work. Residential courses are offered where students practice living by these principles. Students are encouraged to adopt a vegetarian diet, with good posture being emphasized, particularly in meditation. When engaged in any task, students are asked to give their full attention to the task at hand and train themselves not to be distracted by irrelevant thoughts or inner dialogues. The roles of men and women are defined separately and seen as complementary to each other. Dedicated women are expected to wear long skirts or dresses within the School environment, and many do outside the School environment as well.

Members are encouraged to fulfil their roles in society whilst not losing sight of the divine Absolute. Negative thoughts and emotions are considered particularly unhelpful. Students are encouraged to discriminate between the “fine” and “coarse”. The works of great composers, artists and writers such as Mozart, Vivaldi, Leonardo da Vinci and Shakespeare are considered particularly “fine”.

Good company also has an important role in living the spiritual life and members are encouraged to spend time in the company of those supportive of the School's philosophy. However, members are not asked to reject other friends and family. Members are encouraged to lead the spiritual life of a “householder”: work, family and societal obligations are considered important. An individual should seek to develop spiritually within the constraints of ordinary life.

Less than half of the 600 pupils in the St James Independent Schools are affiliated with the School of Economic Science, although most of the teachers are members. All children are encouraged to “pause,” with periods of silent contemplation scheduled into the school day. Pupils in the Senior schools are offered the chance to learn to meditate, though this is not compulsory. While children in the school are not expected to be or become members of the School of Economic Science, the choice of subjects and general running of the school are consistent with the School's philosophy.

Who joins?

While the School's courses are open to everyone, a large proportion of members are from the middle class; the courses particularly attracting professionals. Members are of all ages, now including a number brought-up by their parents within the movement. Membership figures vary, but in recent years, the School has estimated that there are about 1,200 individuals in London and about 1,300 in the rest of Britain who have made a substantial commitment. There are several thousand students in the associated schools throughout the world.

How is the School financed?

Fees for courses are intended to cover administrative and building upkeep costs only; as a matter of principle no tutors on the philosophy courses receive payment. Students are encouraged to donate a week's income for their meditation instruction. However, the School has a general principle that no one should be prevented from taking up the meditation or philosophy courses due to genuine financial hardship. Additional endowments and donations are encouraged for special projects and expenses.

How is the movement organised?

After the death of Leon MacLaren in 1994, the spiritual direction and guidance of the School passed to Donald Lambie. He is supported by the Fellowship, which is the legally constituted body of the School. This governing body consists of around 230 members from which up to nine are elected as officers and members of the Executive Committee responsible for the day-to-day business of the School. This group is chaired by Mr. Graham Skelcey who is also the Principal of the School.

Leaving the Movement

Many people leave the School during or after the introductory course. Some find that the course is not what they expected or wanted, others are satisfied with the introductory course but feel no need to attend more courses. Others leave after finding that the commitments of personal practice and School activities take up more time than they wish to give.

Problems, controversies

There are not many independent sources of information on the School of Economic Science. In 1984, two journalists wrote an "exposé" of the group entitled *Secret Cult*. Rather than respond to the criticisms publicly, the School reviewed the attack internally, which reinforced the opinion of the critics that the School was a secretive organisation. However, much has changed in the last twenty years, particularly since the death of the founder Leon MacLaren in 1994. Current leaders acknowledge some of the criticisms of the past and claim that they have sought to make the necessary adjustments. In response to concern expressed by some outsiders that the content and conduct of the more advanced courses are not made available for observation, the School has told Inform that "this information can, where appropriate, be made available to responsible persons or bodies".

In particular, complaints focused on Leon MacLaren's authority, which some described as absolute or totalitarian. It is claimed that those who displeased him were dealt with severely and that there was not room for any differences of opinion. Supporters counter that strong leadership was necessary to hold the school together, and different opinions were consulted (though not necessarily acted upon).

Some students have found it difficult to accept the degree to which "ego" is attacked, the emphasis on not identifying with negative emotions, and the view that sickness and disability are usually the result of some contravention of natural laws. To this criticism, the School responds that students are urged not to indulge in guilt or self-criticism, but rather to use their energies positively.

Some complain the School requires a level of commitment that leads to a neglect of family and friends. When only one partner in a marriage has joined the School, the related changes in lifestyle and priorities sometimes are difficult for the other partner to accept.

The St James Independent Schools have attracted attention for teaching Sanskrit and silent contemplation. In the past, the head of the St James Senior Boy's school supported of the occasional use of corporal punishment. However this was outlawed in all schools in Britain (1998), the school says it has respected the change in law. Some former students have complained that both staff and other students bullied them during studies at St James.

The School has advertised its courses widely, particularly in the London Underground. It has attracted criticism that its advertisements for the introductory course do not make the nature of the School's particular philosophy clear. In response, the School has modified its advertisements somewhat, but also argues that the introductory courses are general in nature. However, there are still complaints that it is not clear that a *particular* philosophy is being promoted rather than general philosophical exploration.

Further information

From the movement:

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11 Mandeville Place, London W1U 3AJ
Tel: 020 7034 4000
Website: <http://www.schooleconomicsscience.org/>
St. James Independent Schools
Website: <http://www.stjamesschools.co.uk>

Books produced by the School:

MacLaren, Leon *Nature of Society and other essays*. London: School of Economic Science, n. d.
A translation of the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus entitled *The Way of Hermes*
Blake, L. L. *Sovereignty: Power Beyond Politics*. London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1988.

For a critical approach:

The Secret Cult by Peter Hounam and Andrew Hogg, Lion Publishing, 1984.
Website: <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/9169/SES/>

For an objective approach:

See entry in *The New Believers* by David Barrett, London: Cassel & Co, 2001.

An informed journalistic approach:

See entry in *Spying in Guru Land* by William Shaw, London: Forth Estate, 1994.

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New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.

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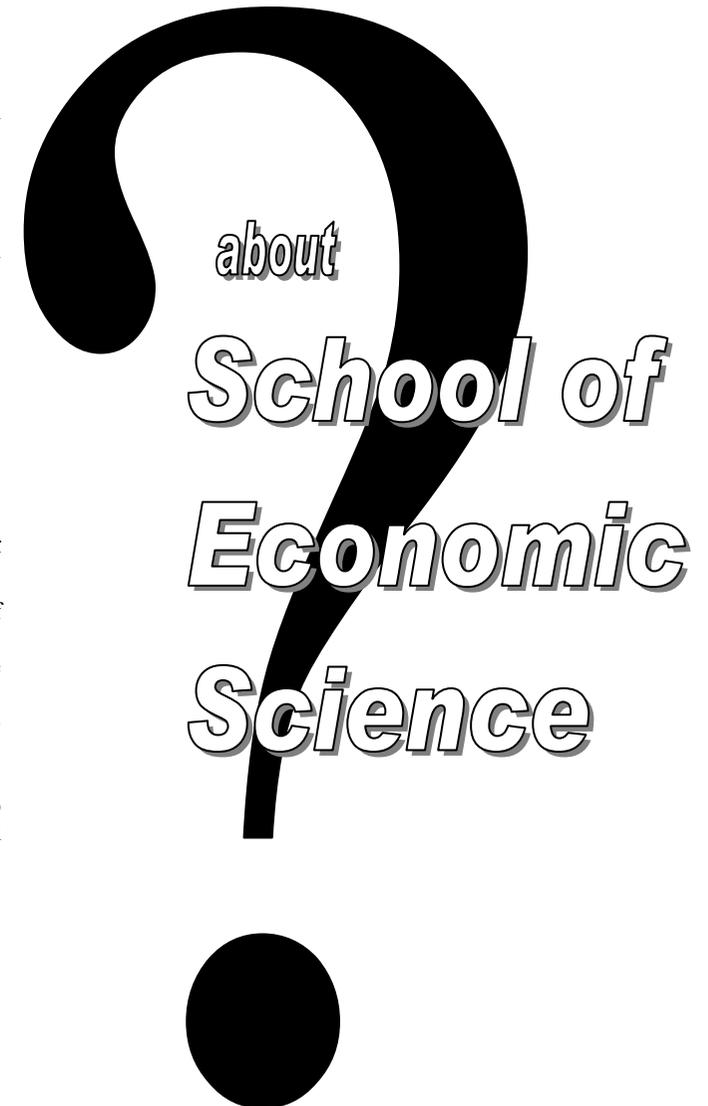
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