CAMBRIDGE 02138

Le professeur, global warming and deficits, outside the academy

FAITH AND UNBELIEF

I am surprised that Katherine Dunn (“Faculty Faith,” July-August, page 15) does not refer to the main historical source of the higher percentage of “nonbelievers” among faculty than in the general public. It derives, like the secular university itself, from the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and its embarrassment about and hostility toward religion. Harvard historian Crane Brinton has stated, “The spirit of the Enlightenment is hostile to organized religion...The corrosiveness of the Enlightenment is nowhere clearer than in its attack on Christianity.” The result is the continuing embarrassment about religion in the academy and the fact that divinity schools in secular universities are usually at the bottom of the status hierarchy. I speak as one raised by fine atheist parents in Greenwich Village and with graduate study in physics and the philosophy of religion.

Owen C. Thomas
Berkeley, Calif.

Academics’ belief or nonbelief in God is only one part of their views on religion. Organized religion provides powerful rituals and supportive communities for the like-minded, which help to stave off anxiety and despair at the present state of affairs by connecting participants to rich heritages of music, architecture, liturgy, and ethical activity. For just such reasons, one can be an agnostic and also an adherent of an organized religion.

David C. Balderston
New York City

It may not take “a longitudinal study over decades” to find out why nonbelievers are overrepresented among professors of psychology and biology. A simple question such as, “When did you become a nonbeliever?” might reveal that disbelief predated the choice of discipline. If so, maybe it wasn’t that psychology and biology made these professors into nonbelievers, as the article suggests, but rather that their disbelief contributed to their chosen career path.

Jorge Colapinto
Wynnewood, Pa.

STATEMENTS APPEAR in Dunn’s report supposedly giving varied percentages of those who are “agnostic”; I beg to disagree. In fact, 100 percent of college professors are agnostics; so are 100 percent of those who are “agnostic.” If so, that any and all faiths, and stockbrokers.

The most basic definition of “agnostic” is someone who does not know. No one has ever known where this cosmos/existence originated, why it is here, or how it will all end up. It seems highly unlikely that anyone will ever know. Obviously, many people pick a faith-fable of their own creation.

Jorge Colapinto
Wynnewood, Pa.

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OVERSEAS CHRONOGRAPH

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...DEDICATED TO PERFECTION

VACHERON CONSTANTIN
Manufacture Horlogère. Genève, depuis 1755.
choosing, or more likely the faith-fable popular in their family or neighborhood. I have no quarrel with that, so long as they don’t try to use it to control my life. There is no great onus to being agnostic, other than the obvious fact that you will never be elected president of the United States. And consider the most charming and endearing quality of agnostics: they do not send missionaries!

LYLE R. DAVIDSON, M.A.T. ’68
San Diego

LE PROFESSEUR
Congratulations to Craig Lambert on his article about international-relations scholar Stanley Hoffmann (“Le Professeur,” July-August, page 32). I studied at Harvard from 1969 to 1971 before joining the British Diplomatic Service (from which I recently retired), and my memory of the Hoffmann courses I took or audited (notably “War”) is one of my strongest from that tumultuous time—marked as it was by the student “contestation” of the period about Vietnam. Experiencing it first hand was a political education in itself. I was fascinated by his blend of European and American sensibilities.

All my professional life I have benefited from the experience of his teaching and insights (and those of Karl Deutsch), and I am delighted to read that he is still so hale and active at Harvard.

CHARLES DE CHASSIRON, M.P.A. ’71
London

As coeditor and coauthor of the Hoffmann festchrift, I read with pride and pleasure the long-overdue profile of Harvard’s best professor, Stanley Hoffmann. You captured his humanity as well as his brilliance, his loyalty to friends as well as his skepticism of cant. Harvard is richer for his half-century of pathbreaking scholarship, his inspiring career as a public intellectual whose life, at least in my case, has demonstrated the importance of speaking truth to power in the classroom as well as outside it. Hard though it is, I am still teaching international relations, especially American foreign policy, to the next generation!

LINDA B. MILLER ’59
Adjunct professor, Brown University
South Wellfleet, Mass.

Editor’s note: The scholarly Stanley Hoffmann discovered one mistake in the article: “The Germans didn’t get to Nice until after the capitulation of Italy in September 1943,” he notes. “Between November 1942, when the Germans moved into most of previously unoccupied France, and September 1943, the Nazis graciously left Nice to the Italians, whose occupation was perfectly harmless.”

FIX GLOBAL WARMING, DEFICITS
It was painfully gratifying to read in Jonathan Shaw’s “Debtor Nation,” (July-August, page 40) that nearly all the experts agree on how serious a problem are our combined national budget deficits and trade deficits. It was disappointing, however, not to see any mention of the best solution.

Global warming has encouraged some of us to consider energy conservation and alternative sources of energy in an effort to reduce greenhouse gases. Those solutions are also the best way to address those deficits.

Most of the technology is already in place to replace every drop of imported petroleum by bio-fuels (not ethanol, but artificial petroleum, produced via pyrolysis from plant waste, animal carcass waste, and “poop,” cost-effective when the price of petroleum is at or above $50 a barrel), but so far the political will to make that a priority is missing. It has been estimated that if we gained our petroleum exclusively from plants, they could be sustainably grown in approximately 30 percent of our arable land, which is an amount not currently needed for food production anyway.

If the United States were to stop importing petroleum in favor of artificial home-grown petroleum, the major part of the trade deficit would disappear. Our military budget currently exceeds the combined total of all the military budgets of all the other countries of the world, but without needing to “protect”
our foreign sources of oil, we could drastically reduce the military budget to a sane level. If the rest of the world were to join such a program, Middle Eastern terrorism aimed at us would dry up overnight without the Saudi oil money to fuel it, freeing up more of our national budget. And, somewhere along the way, we would reverse the greenhouse-gases problem. It’s a win-win-win situation. When do we start?

John Fitzhugh Millar ’66
Williamsburg, Va

CERTIFIED BY HARVARD
In his Class Day address (“I See You,” July-August, page 55), Bill Clinton reminded the Harvard community that all humans are 99.9 percent identical in our genetic makeup. He urged us to think more about our similarities and less about the differences arising from one-thousandth part of our genetic material. Since we are so nearly alike, it seems probable that most of the vast differences in people’s life circumstances can be attributed to the accidental factors of birth environments and early education, rather than innate ability.

However, the premise of our academic system is that our innate differences are overwhelmingly important. A Harvard degree is supposed to identify its holder as extraordinarily smart, and to certify his or her contribution as uniquely valuable to public discourse. The tremendous power of the Harvard brand helps to sustain the belief that the only knowledge worth having is that certified by an academic degree, and the only people worth consulting on any question are those with academic credentials. Even though we know that brilliant academics can be clueless in areas outside their specialties, and that most of the useful knowledge and wisdom of humanity is gained and passed along outside the walls of the ivory tower, we tend to accept academic certification as the sine qua non of human achievement.

In another of this year’s Commencement speeches (page 57), Bill Gates asked for what purpose “one of the great collections of intellectual talent in the world” was gathered at Harvard. He indicated that he thought it was to solve the complex problems facing humanity, especially the problem of how to reduce inequity. If the Harvard community believes that the
Wrong-headed

On Empire

It is astonishingly wrong-headed, anachronistic, and oblivious for a historian of the stature and scholarship of Niall Ferguson to be promoting empire in the twenty-first century, as reported in “The Global Empire of Niall Ferguson” (May-June, page 33).

Post World War II history clearly shows that each and every effort at colonial domination has been a costly and abject failure, fraught with death, destruction, misery, anger, resentment, blowback, and significant loss of strength and stature for the aggressor nation. Modern improvements in communication have made ethnic and national cohesion a much stronger and more potent force against an occupying foreign military than in the days of Queen Victoria. To subjugate a nation of tens of millions of people now requires a commitment of lives, resources, and ruthlessness that no democratic people would find acceptable—even if they were to employ Ferguson’s reprehensible “solution” of drafting the unemployed, undocumented, and imprisoned toward that effort.

Occupation is the essential enterprise in erecting an empire. And it is a profoundly brutal and dehumanizing enterprise. This is especially true when the occupying force is fighting far from home and is unfamiliar with the local culture. Missing from Ferguson’s thinking is the basic concept of national sovereignty and the much more effective and uplifting effort to lead by example. That these basic lessons of modern history have been lost on such an eminent historian is testament to the supremely blinding nature of the hubris, jingoism, and exceptionalism at the heart of Anglo-American conservatism.

Even the best-trained and most disciplined fighting force in human history, the United States military, is rife with daily horror stories highlighting the wickedness and futility of attempting to subjugate a foreign nation in the modern world. Ferguson’s historical insight should be greatly improved if he would take a sabbatical from romanticizing and mythologizing the glory years of the nineteenth-century British empire, civilizing unruly natives around the world, and enlist in the Coalition effort in Iraq, where he can experience firsthand the horrible reality of empire-building today.

Ricardo Hinkle, M.L.A. ’90
New York City

Wrong-headed on Empire

In his “vita” on Wendell Phillips (May-June, page 38), Castle Freeman cited but was unable to name an elderly gentleman who made the observation that “he did not plan to attend the funeral of Wendell Phillips [but] wished it known that he approved of it.” Classmates Gretchen Becker ’63 and William C. Waterhouse ’63 have informed the editors independently that the speaker in question was Judge Rockwood Hoar, A.B. 1835, of Concord, Massachusetts. The reference appears on page 145 of Memories and Experiences of Moncure Daniel Conway, an 1854 graduate of Harvard Divinity School.

Given that people really differ very little in general intelligence, Harvard has had to erect many barriers to keep out most people and so maintain the value of its brand. These barriers include not only money but the ability and willingness to blend with, charm, or impress the tiny class of people who run the world. People who refuse to pretend that they are significantly smarter than non-Harvardians need not apply. Harvard people are self-selected to over-value our differences and under-value our common humanity.

Such self-selection might be good for individual survival and yet counter-productive for the survival of the species. It will take the combined genius of all humankind to get us through the dangers we now face. Harvard will have to learn—and to teach—the value of wisdom with or without the proper credentials, if it is to play its optimal role during the challenges ahead.

Jane Collins ’71
Medford, Mass.

ADDENDUM: Death Wishes

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Ricardo Hinkle, M.L.A. ’90
New York City

Curricular Reform

Reporting on the debate about curricular change in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (“College Curriculum Change Completed,” July-August, page 65), you say that I “voiced the concern that the curriculum, by emphasizing the connection between students’ studies and the rest of their lives, was insufficiently scholarly, perhaps even anti-intellectual.” This account is highly misleading.

I have no objection to the idea that a general-education requirement should be composed of subjects that will be of particular value to students in their lives after Harvard. What I was objecting to were clauses in the legislation specifying that all courses qualifying for general-ed-

Letters

Due to an editing error in “Debtor Nation” (July-August, page 40), President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s actions during the Suez crisis were inaccurately described. Although he did block the International Monetary Fund from stabilizing the pound sterling, he did not direct the Federal Reserve to orchestrate a run on the currency. The run originated in the private sector. The correct version of the text may be found on-line and in a PDF available for download at www.harvard-magazine.com/2007/07/debtor-nation.html.

With a news note about the election of Bayles professor of medicine Michael B. Brenner to the National Academy of Sciences (July-August, page 64), the editors ran a photograph of Michael P. Brenner, Glover professor of applied mathematics and applied physics. Michael B. appears here.

Errata

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ucation credit must connect their subject matter with issues of practical concern to students now and later, as distinct from whatever specific intellectual interest they may have in the subject matter. Contrary to what the general-education legislation passed by the Faculty demands, any course that ensures a broad understanding of (say) fundamental physics should qualify for general education credit in science, whether or not it relates the physics it deals with to other matters of broad concern. The same is true for general education courses in other areas.

To be sure, science courses must be available that appeal to non-scientists, as well as literature courses for non-poets, philosophy for non-philosophers, and so on. Drawing connections with issues of broad and practical concern is one way to design such courses. But the aims of general education do not require that all students, whether they are scientists, poets, or philosophers, must take courses of this kind.

Thomas M. Scanlon Jr., Ph.D. ’68
Alford professor of natural religion, moral philosophy, and civil polity
Cambridge

REUNION UNION

The July-August issue has an obit for Edward A. Meany ’48. We won’t forget him. He arrived at our thirty-fifth reunion in 1983 with a charming woman he wished to wed. Someone who knew his way around local government convinced Ed and the lady to marry as part of our reunion. On June 6, during a boat tour of Boston Harbor, the captain headed the boat into the wind, the bride clutched a bouquet of plastic flowers from the dining area, and one of the three ministers in our class performed the wedding ceremony in the open on the main deck, greeted by cheers of classmates and wives. A union at the reunion, one never to be forgotten.

Justin Fishbein ’48
Highland Park, Ill.

SPEAK UP, PLEASE

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