



BeliefWatch: Harvard's Fuss Over Faith

By Lisa Miller
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Jan. 22, 2007 issue - In your prayers tonight, you might want to thank God that no one has put you in charge of the Task Force on General Education at Harvard.

The job wasn't going to be easy. Harvard has been looking at revising its core curriculum—established in 1978 to ensure that all undergraduates are educated in certain subject areas—for years. Committees were convened and disbanded, defeated by internal politics and conceptual stalemates. The most recent iteration, the aforementioned task force, is now drafting its final recommendations for a vote next month by the faculty. It will likely succeed, but not without sustaining considerable damage from the culture wars.

In October, the task force issued an innocent-enough proposal. Given the prominence of religion in the world today, all students should be required to do coursework in an area called "Reason & Faith." "Religion is *realpolitik*, both nationally and internationally," the report said. "By providing [students] with a fuller understanding of both local and global issues involving religious faith, the courses are intended to help students become more informed and reflective citizens."

Criticism was loud and immediate—and came largely from the science faculty. "There is an enormous constituency of people who would hold that faith and reason are two routes to knowledge. It is a mistake to affirm that," says Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker. "It's like having a requirement in 'Astronomy & Astrology.' They're not comparable topics." Pinker is not just splitting hairs. In a 2006 study of the religious beliefs of science professors at elite universities, SUNY Buffalo sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund found that many are infuriated by what they see as a widespread erosion of belief in proven scientific theories, such as evolution. "Some of the faculty I talked to wanted to suppress discussion of religion in the classroom," she says. Pinker says he's all for teaching students about world religions, just not as a requirement.

Enough people agreed with him. In December the task force withdrew its "Reason & Faith" recommendation, substituting instead a category called "What It Means to Be a Human Being." On the phone, Louis Menand, the English professor who cochaired the task force, sounds exhausted. "It's noncontroversial that there is this thing called religion out there and that it has an enormous impact on the world we live in. Scholars should be able to study and teach it without getting cooties"—a term of art, not science.

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