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How Should Harvard Students Study Religion?
Paul V.M. Flesher

In October 2006, Harvard University caused a stir when the school released a preliminary report detailing a committee's ideas for a new general education curriculum. Among the usual science, writing, math and history requirements was a mandated category of courses titled "Reason and Faith."

CNN was typical of the media interpretation, noting that Harvard would "require all undergraduates to study religion." Harvard Professor Stephen Pinker railed against the proposal, saying that even the title "makes it sound like 'faith' and 'reason' are parallel and equivalent ways of knowing." President and Provost of the University of Notre Dame, an openly Catholic institution, countered in *The Washington Post*, saying, "It's time for universities to explore the reasoning that is possible within a tradition of faith."

This month the committee released its final recommendation for general education. "Reason and Faith" has been replaced with "Culture and Belief." The new category is much broader and, therefore, harder to define, but also more accurately reflects the role of religion in society and the place of its study in a university education.

Harvard's reason and faith category quickly became the focus of a debate about the role of religion in general education rather than a debate about the requirement itself. The discussion ignored the fact that the requirement did not privilege religion as much as it set religion up for an examination of its weaknesses and failings.

The requirement expected the examination of religion primarily in its conflict with the modern world in general. In academic parlance, reason is short-hand for the intellectual changes that have shaped the modern world. It refers to science and the scientific world view, to technology and to secularism. The report suggested that courses fulfilling this requirement could focus on religion and science, medicine, spirituality, and religion in modern America, and wars of religion (not religious attitudes towards war), along with courses in religion, democracy and closed societies.

Given that Harvard University understands itself as "profoundly secular," one can imagine how these comparisons would have come out. At best, courses would treat religions as well-meaning but incapable of meeting

modernity's challenges. And having this as a general education requirement for all students would actually end up promoting the idea that religions are inferior to science and hence should be ignored.

By changing the final requirement to one of culture and belief, Harvard shifts the emphasis from religion's clash with modernity to religion's role in the world's cultures, including our own.

Rather than compare religion with science on science's terms, the courses will focus on religions and the impact (or lack thereof) religion's beliefs have on the cultures in which they reside. This enables students to study religions in their own right, as religions occur in the realm of human social activity, rather than in the more philosophically posed debates about war, science and medicine. It also moves away from current American cultural debates towards longer lasting and more enduring approaches. This is good, for this is a requirement of general education, not a major or a degree.

By pairing culture with belief, Harvard's new requirement labors under the meaning of the two words of its title. First, by emphasizing culture, the broad category which can refer to nearly all features of human society, from food and clothes, morality and family structure, to music and popular culture, the requirement places religion into a vast sea of human activity. While that is certainly where religion exists and should be studied, it is also in danger of being diluted by the currents of these other aspects as they ebb and flow.

Second, by using the term belief, rather than religion or even faith, the requirement suggests the importance lies in what people think. It ignores the fact that religions are also about human activity and motivation. While repeated actions such as worship and ethical behavior calmly shape a society on a daily basis, religion also motivates people to monumental deeds that can shift the character and direction of a society overnight.

In the end, Harvard University's new formulation of its general education requirement constitutes a step in the right direction, but it remains a compromise between those who think that it is important for students to understand something about religions and those who do not.