

ing Western governments, cares if such non-hegemonist despots stay in power for another 100 years. A dream state for any dictator.

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In a well-written analysis, Pervez Hoodbhoy states that “most universities in Islamic countries have a starkly inferior quality of teaching and learning” in which “obedience and rote learning are stressed” and “debate, analysis, and class discussions are infrequent.”

Those particular problems also occur in non-Islamic countries, as Richard Feynman observed during a year of teaching physics in Brazil:

After lecturing the students about the need to work the physics homework problems to gain understanding, a student delegation “told me that I didn’t understand the backgrounds that they have, that they can study without doing the problems, that they have already learned arithmetic, and that [working such problems] was beneath them.”

...Feynman would stress to the students “how useful it was to work [the physics problems] together, to discuss the questions, to talk it over, but they wouldn’t do that either, because they would be losing face if they had to ask someone else.”¹

Reference

1. R. P. Feynman, “Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!: Adventures of a Curious Character,” W. W. Norton, New York (1985), p. 194.

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Pervez Hoodbhoy courageously details how “intolerance and militancy sweep across the Muslim world” while “personal and academic freedoms diminish” and “secularism continues to retreat.” His sobering and well-documented account of Islamic science in which “the penalties for disbelief are severe” has dispelled many illusions.

But we should avoid new myths. Pseudoscience, parapsychology, and belief in UFOs offer no serious threat to Western science. Moreover, calls for experimental restraint in handling living matter are neither frivolous superstition nor antiscientific. Even creationists generally campaign only for a place in classroom discussion—a teaching opportu-

nity at best and a mild inconvenience at worst, compared to the physical threats and crushed inquiry that Hoodbhoy has witnessed. Nor does scientific advancement demand abandonment of religion; Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, and James Clerk Maxwell demonstrate not only that Western science flourished well before the 18th-century rise of atheism but that later scientists continued to practice religion. (Many still do.) Michael Faraday used scientific experiments to discredit séances—a move admired by John Henry Cardinal Newman.

Science indeed triumphs through establishing belief on logic and reason rather than on fear. From Socrates to Jesus to Galileo to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the West reveres thinkers who suffer violence, rather than inflict it, for the sake of truth. Irrationalism in the West flourishes most among relativists who take power, rather than truth, to be the aim of science. A preference for irrational force over knowledge is in fact the common enemy of science in the Muslim world and the West. Hoodbhoy’s bold manifesto heroically faces that enemy.

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In his article, Pervez Hoodbhoy referred to “extreme Hindu groups such as Vishnu Hindu Parishad, which has called for ethnic cleansing of Christians and Muslims.” He obviously meant the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, one of the largest Hindu organizations in India, with branches in many countries, including the US. The allegation of calls for “ethnic cleansing” is extreme; no authority of the VHP has made derogatory statements toward Muslims or Christians. No one can produce a pamphlet, speech, or statement made by VHP authorities that speaks of eliminating Muslims and Christians. It is irresponsible to publish such a vicious accusation without checking the facts.

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[Editor’s note: A correction for the name of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad appeared on page 17 of the October 2007 issue of PHYSICS TODAY.]

Hoodbhoy replies: Toufic Hakim would have preferred that I discuss “the teachings of Islam in relation to



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