

On Conformity, Education, Anti-Intellectualism

By Carlton H. Bowyer

Last May the *Missouri Alumnus* carried an article by Professor Roderick McGrew in which the charge was made that the majority of teachers and students today are guilty of conformity and anti-intellectualism. I am one of the many who feel that the charge was unjustly made and that the implications of McGrew's article should not go unchallenged.

In the first place, I would take issue with McGrew's narrow definitions of intellectualism and conformity. McGrew seems to have conformity confused with blind imitation. He uses the word as though it represented something one should avoid at all costs. However, it is fairly obvious to most social scientists that to conform is a necessary part of living in a society. My experience the past several years as a teacher of philosophy at the Missouri Penitentiary has convinced me that non-conformity, rather than conformity, is the ogre! One realizes that progress does not arise out of imitation, but arises only from an unbound intellectual activity. It is obvious that such activity can, and must, go on in a framework of intelligent conformity.

McGrew restricts intellectualism to ideas as presented in the great books program of Adler and Hutchins. His intellectualism appears only within the framework of the liberal arts curriculum of pre-Eliot Harvard. This seems borne out by his statement that true education means the individual seeking his own

truth, defining his own values and developing his own taste—but only along classical lines. There can be no quarrel with the definition so far as it goes, but surely our system is not to be condemned for the attempt to go farther than the boundaries of a classical program.

I can not over-emphasize the fact that as a member of the teaching profession I fully realize the importance of a classical orientation, but at the same time I feel that it is equally important for educators to avoid McGrew's trap of requiring conformity to an intellectual standard of a pre-Deweyian era, and to steer clear of labeling any deviation from such a limited standard as non-intellectual. It seems obvious that in spite of its merit the educational system of pre-Eliot Harvard is out of step with an advancing nation. I am perfectly willing to accept McGrew's statement that the educational system is not something that has developed apart from the society, but I do not think that this creates a "situation." It is a recognition of a necessary correlation between a society and its institutions, rather than as McGrew states, "evidence of a current revulsion against intellectual values and the spirit of conformity that goes with it."

Contrary to McGrew's experience, I have been made acutely aware that persons who "populate the great market place" have an intense interest in the vital problems that concern man—his search for

By Ned Etheridge

It is popular to assert that the trouble with Education, American society, people, "the World," is that there is too much conformity. Further, it is said that conformity is anti-intellectual. These ideas are false.

Taken by themselves, neither conformity nor non-conformity are virtues. The value of both procedures depends entirely upon the thing, or things, conformed with, or not conformed with. Obviously, it would be of great value were we to conform entirely to the truth, and to not conform with those things which are of no value. Obviously, it would be of great value were we to conform to the law, to moral and ethical standards. The mathematician must conform to fact in order to be successful. The historian must conform to fact in order to be accurate. The writer must conform to the language to be understood. The painter must conform to "the language" to be understood.

Today, however, despite the failure of many to succeed in doing so, there is an effort on the part of many of us to not conform. It is popular in Education

to try to "individualize" the student—to enable and to encourage him to not conform. It is popular for students to have no regard for authority, save their own, in order that they might not conform. It is popular to teach that "we should not make 'value judgments'"—hence to not conform. It is popular to describe Art as being "creative self-expression"—hence to not conform. Although it is popular that Architecture be based upon the general tenet of functionalism, nobody can say what the function should be, nor how it should be suited.

Intellectualism is based upon understanding. Understanding is based upon familiarity. A thing which is truly creative, new, cannot be understood because no one can be familiar with it. Hence, it is the creative, the non-conformist, which is anti-intellectual.

You can teach the value of creating, but you cannot teach the act of creating. Furthermore, the only things we can "know" about are the things which we understand. The only things worth teaching are the things which we understand. In fact, the only things worth teaching are *those things which are worth re-*

truth, his search for ultimate values and his desire for rapport between man and man, nation and nation. These same persons are not likely to speak of the world tensions in terms of Plato's Republic or in terms of Aristotle's four causes, but I do not think we can deny that their search is intellectual. When a discussion of religion brings forth Spinozistic overtones from a garage mechanic one is convinced that intellectual investigation is not a thing that went out of style with the classics—pre-19th century, of course.

I am happy to say that my experience with both student and faculty at Missouri University has also been quite different from that of McGrew's. As I walk around the campus at Missouri and see some of the 10,000 students currently enrolled, I am reminded of the fact that in the days of Colonial America any sort of higher education was available to less than ten per cent of this number. Certainly American education is succeeding in its goal of supplying equal opportunity for all students. This is not to imply that there is a special virtue in numbers alone, and we have certainly not sacrificed quality for quantity. Teachers know that there are all sorts of students—good, bad and indifferent. Good teachers must recognize the fact that it is a mistake to expect or to demand the same degree of intellectual activity from all students. Our system allows a student to progress intellectually according to his abilities, and I find the high degree of original thinking and intellectual

curiosity among our students at Missouri most encouraging.

I think that one can safely agree with McGrew that the faculty at Missouri University is fairly typical of college teachers over the nation, but my experience certainly has not led me to believe that there is any trend of anti-intellectualism in the teaching profession. To the contrary, I can not but feel humble in the face of the privilege of daily association with some of the great thinkers of our times who inhabit the Missouri University campus.

Just as there are different sorts of students, there are different sorts of teachers with wide and varied interests and different degrees of intellectual achievement. I feel that these differences are highly desirable, and it is my belief that most professional educators (I do not limit this term to professors of education, but properly include all teachers) share this view and would agree with the statement made by Dean W. Francis English in his excellent article in the May issue of the *Missouri Alumnus*. Dean English stated that "we have not arrived, but we simply seem to be headed in what we feel is the right direction."

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peating. There is no other excuse for Education, methodology notwithstanding. You cannot teach a person how to deal with an entirely strange experience. This is why there is such a great value in the classics, and in tradition. Tradition teaches a way to react to the situations with which we are familiar. Study of the classics acquaints us with a knowledge of the furthest advance of human knowledge and achievement. Hence, the art of doing anything becomes measurable in terms of the degree of excellence of the product, rather than upon the mere *difference* of the product.

On the other hand, I would agree with those who argue that we need not be told how we should dress, within reason. It is understood that we might tolerate each other's choice of religions and politics. In fact, one of the most fundamental truths about people is that they are not alike, and that they are not equal. One of the great stumbling blocks of religion is that people simply cannot conform, no matter how they try. It is this congenital difference in people which education seeks to minimize. It is, in-

deed, impossible to *educate* away from conformity. This is a matter of definition. Any weakness in our educational system, therefore, may be found in those areas in which there has been no teaching, no learning, but only "creating"—non-conforming, non-learning.

As for social order, if we can ever agree that that is what we want, I recommend that if we all had a good practicable religion to follow we might be able to make *it* last for another 2,000 years. Regarding the things that matter, there is little *need* for much change within the short span of the human life despite the fact that change seems unavoidable.

Ned Etheridge, B.J. '42, B.S. in Ed. '51, is instructor in art at Christian College. In a letter accompanying his article he wrote: "After having read 'Conformity and Anti-Intellectualism' in your May issue I wish to congratulate you for having the interest to publish a statement on that most important topic. I don't agree with Mr. McGrew on many of the aspects of the problem which he discusses, and I hope you will permit me to take advantage of your interest in this subject to the extent of reading my declarations in that regard." Mr. Etheridge is pictured on page seven with his portrait of Professor Emeritus O. R. Johnson.