

# Students are Taught Religion

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Editor:

For Mr. (John) Baumgardner to imply that Eric Walstrom's views were a product of "bonding with his teacher" is to give Eric and my other students less credit than they deserve. They are independent, thoughtful, honest thinkers, who are capable of understanding a wide range of philosophical and religious perspectives without having them "implanted" by their teacher, with whom they can and often do disagree.

The unit described by Mr. Walstrom deals with Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Islam, Rousseau, Locke, Kant, existentialism., the Book of Job and Archibald MacLeish's Christian existentialist play J. B. (Earlier in the year we study Socrates, and later Nietzsche and Marx.) The topics are presented by the students and are based on their own research, not mine. I do ask them to be as respectful of other ideas as they would want others to be of theirs.

I agree with Mr. Baumgardner that these ideas have metaphysical bases that attempt to answer ultimate questions about belief (such as the nature of reality, belief in an afterlife). But these bases become evident in the presentations, and they vary widely. Since Mr. Baumgardner ventures that our world view is based on materialism, I will simply say that the only materialists in the unit are the Epicureans, who believe that existence is only physical (as in Epicurus's theory of atoms) and Marx (dialectical materialism). So he should not worry about students having materialist assumptions "implanted" in their minds.

What concerns involved teachers is adults' fearing that students reflexively believe everything they read or study. In novels and plays, we find debates about issues such as truth-telling in politics (King Lear), loyalty to the state or to god(s) and conscience (Antigone; On the Duty of Civil Disobedience), and "justifiable" murder (Crime and Punishment; Beloved). Each work presents a number of views, elaborated by the characters of Shakespeare, Sophocles, Thoreau, Dostoyevsky, and Toni Morrison. Students argue and debate these

authors' ideas just as they do the religious and philosophical views presented. How can they be brainwashed into accepting all these different views? I'm not clear what Mr. Baumgardner is recommending -- a curriculum with only a single world view? How can we know that we disagree with, say, Kant, if we don't study him? And isn't it desirable to know what Ramadan is if we meet a Muslim who is celebrating it?

Does Mr. Baumgardner want students to abstain from reading classic or contemporary literature? Or to read it without thinking about it? Or to use a literal biblical interpretation as the sole point of reference? If one's belief makes one afraid to discuss these issues, it's not much of a belief. Los Alamos students are quite capable of such knowledge and debate.

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