

# Worldviews are not Taught in School: A response to Rebecca Shankland

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21 Mar 1997

*The Los Alamos Monitor*

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Editor:

I do not question Rebecca Shankland's sincerity when she extols (3/13/97) her students' abilities to think independently and honestly and deal with a wide range of philosophical and religious perspectives. But is her assessment necessarily correct? I note her student Eric Walstrom begins his 2/27/97 letter with "I wasn't sure how to argue" and then never deals with issues of a basic philosophical nature. Rather he dismisses my views as fanatical agitation. If he believes I have made fundamental conceptual mistakes, he should be quick and incisive to point them out.

Let me suggest an analogy as to what may be going on. Classical geometry, formulated by Euclid, is based on ten axioms and postulates. All theorems and results of Euclidean geometry can be derived rigorously from these simple principles. A student who learns merely how to solve certain problems in geometry, perhaps even a wide assortment of problems, but who is never exposed to the foundational axioms and postulates will be lost if someone seeks to discuss them with him. And what can this student say if he is challenged that one of Euclid's postulates, say the one which asserts two lines parallel in some local neighborhood never intersect, is wrong? In most cases, the poor student will be utterly clueless.

Worldviews, like mathematical frameworks such as Euclidean geometry, are based on a set of axiom-like assumptions. If one is to analyze and understand a worldview, even ones own, it is essential to identify these axioms. Is this identification of the foundational worldview axioms really occurring in Mrs. Shankland's class? I would rejoice to learn it were so, but the evidence I currently have causes me to wonder.

Let me therefore propose a hypothetical class assignment. James Madison and Maximillian Robespierre were contemporaries, at least until Robespierre was executed in 1794. Madison is credited with being the chief author of the

U.S. Constitution, while Robespierre played a leading role in the French Revolution. These two men, from many lines of evidence, had radically different worldviews. The assignment is to identify and contrast the axioms on which the worldviews of these two men rested. A bonus assignment would be to identify the axioms of ones own worldview and compare them with those of Madison and Robespierre. How might this exercise be relevant to us in 1997?

I believe the problem of people talking past one another and general communication disconnects evident in so many contexts today arises in large measure because of worldview isolation. People in one worldview framework have great difficulty relating to people in another worldview framework. Much of this isolation is because few take the trouble of seeking to understand the axiomatic foundation of their own, much less that of another, worldview. But should not this sort of basic worldview understanding be a centerpiece of a good education? I for one believe it should. Perhaps "Los Alamos talking to itself" in letters section of the Monitor as the editor mentioned recently can help move us toward making this happen.

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