

Teaching about Worldviews is Inadequate: A response to Eric Walstrom

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Editor:

I empathize with the distress Eric Walstrom expresses in his 2/27/97 letter. It is entirely normal for students to experience a degree of bonding with their teachers, especially those they like and respect. So his anxiety relating to my charges against some of the teachers in the Los Alamos schools, including conceivably some of his own, is quite understandable.

Seeking to defend his teachers, Mr. Walstrom describes a religion/philosophy unit recently covered in his English class and stresses that the various viewpoints were 'presented', objectively from his perspective, and that none 'was taught as right or wrong.' I am keenly aware this is how such topics are handled, and this is at the heart of my concern about what is going on in the public schools of our nation.

The issue here is that the metaphysical assumptions that form the framework and context in which class content is presented are never acknowledged, and yet these assumptions frequently represent the primary message the student ultimately retains. My guess is that such worldview assumptions were never once mentioned by Mr. Walstrom's English teacher.

How does one identify worldview assumptions? Diagnostic questions are useful. Some examples are: What is the nature of reality? What is prime reality (i.e., what is self-existent)? What is a human being? Why is it possible to know anything at all? How does one know what is right or wrong? What is the meaning of history? What happens to a person at death? Every worldview has a definite answer to such questions. And classroom content is framed in the context of some worldview, usually that of the teacher and/or textbook.

My criticism is that teachers are not being candid with their students about the worldview in which they are operating. There is no niche in the curriculum for teaching even the basics of worldview analysis. As a consequence, it is easy for a teacher to 'present' information, but have what is mainly conveyed to the student be the teacher's own unspoken, unacknowledged worldview.

The student, because he has not been equipped with the requisite critical thinking skills, is oblivious to the beliefs, assumptions, and worldview being implanted in his mind. The student can earnestly believe the teacher is being perfectly objective and non-dogmatic, while a distinct philosophical framework is being transmitted by the teacher and is being received intact, unwittingly and unknowingly, on the part of the student.

Mr. Walstrom's difficulty in dealing with the ideas and issues I raise betrays, I suspect, this very lack of exposure to worldview analysis. His education in Los Alamos schools to this point has equipped him to think and reason, I venture, mainly within the strictures of a materialist thought system. The only category he has then for a person like myself within such a framework is an irrational fanatical religionist.

But Mr. Walstrom seems to be hinting that something does not compute. Might not something be amiss, if as I claim, my views bear a respectable resemblance to those of the individuals who founded our nation and also of many of the more prominent scientists from the past several centuries, who were even more clear spoken on these issues than I?

I read between the lines in Mr. Walstrom's letter a discontent with the worldview he somehow has acquired. I take that to be a positive indicator he may well escape from the awful snare the enemy of his soul has set.

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