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### Helping Students to Think

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# ARTICLE

## Helping Students to Think

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Perhaps the best way to provide a safe, secure, and nurturing school environment is, first, to outlaw personal attacks of any kind (this seems to pass constitutional muster) and, second, to help students to think critically so that they are not such easy prey to propaganda—political, economic, or religious.

Consider the following (entirely fictitious) scenario: A group of students calling themselves “Intellectuals Against Superstition” circulates material urging fellow students to think critically about religious matters. They never say, “This is so” or “This is not so,” but they ask questions. Thus, in one of their messages, they ask:

1. Is it logical to believe in virgin birth? Are there stories of virgin births in religions other than Christianity?
2. Do you know that the ritual custom of consuming a deity dates to primitive times and that the literal belief in it was criticized by Cicero? Is it logical to believe that priests can transform bread and wine into the body and blood of a deity?
3. Is it logical to believe in the existence of hell? Would an omniscient, omnipotent, and all-good god let anyone go there or even allow it to exist?

The group circulates questions like these regularly. The school tells the group that it cannot distribute its messages on campus. The “Intellectuals” argue that their devotion to rationality compels them to speak out against non-evidentially held beliefs. It also argues that young students should be protected against the terror and dread induced by the indefensible doctrine of hell and eternal punishment.

I don’t know what the fate of this group would be. It does seem to me, however, that the schools should—as part of their regular curriculum—raise the kinds of questions asked by the “Intellectuals.” Without prescribing answers (as both religious schools and atheistic communism have done), schools should encourage students to read widely, gather information on various positions, and think about controversial issues central to human life. If schools were to do this, students would be better prepared to respond to groups promoting various forms of propaganda.

As part of their education, students should be encouraged to read at least parts of the Bible. Both religious and non-religious students are often pathetically ignorant of biblical text. Many members of the religious right, for example, carry Bibles but rarely study them. Students should read carefully the parts quoted by anti-gay groups and be ready to respond with questions for further discussion. Read Genesis 19 carefully. How should we feel about a father who would offer his own daughters for gang-rape in order to protect his male visitors? How should we feel about the (perhaps vengeful) incest that follows this incident?

Not only would students be protected from propaganda by such a curriculum of critical thinking, but they would also gain valuable cultural knowledge. In colleges, we don’t suppose that we are trying to convert students to Christianity when we have them read Augustine, Aquinas, Cardinal Newman, or Martin Luther. Nor do we suppose that we are teaching them to be atheists when we assign Marx, Freud, Russell, or Darwin. We are providing them with the most powerful, beautiful, and thoughtful arguments on religion. Surely, high school students would profit from an introduction to these ways of thought.