

The Angry Tribe of Opinionated Professors, Part 2 of 2

"So where does that leave us?" asked Theresa.

I shrugged. "You tell me," I said. "Exactly what is wrong with the way that Professors Egregious, Mundi and Schlange deal with opinions different than their own? I'm not asking the problem with their motives. I'm asking the problem with how they behave, with how they talk."

"The problem with their talk is that it's offensive," said Peter.

"That can't be right," said Theresa. "It's too much like saying that they're hateful."

"I don't see how," said Peter. "It's all too easy to say that someone's motives are hateful just because you don't agree with what he says. We agreed that we don't want to play that game."

"But isn't it just as easy to say you're offended just because you don't agree with what he says?" countered Theresa. "How is that game any better?"

Don said, "Reesi's right. Whether their talk offends anyone is beside the point. I think the problem is that it's biased against Christianity."

I asked, "So would you say that criticism of Christianity should be forbidden?"

"No-o-o," he quavered, "I wouldn't say that."

I grinned. "I wouldn't either. But why not?"

He answered, "If we said that, then what would happen if the tables were turned and people of a different creed came to power?"

"Right," said Peter. "Maybe then nobody would be allowed to criticize Islam, or Hinduism or whatever."

"The tables have already turned," said Theresa. "Isn't that why we're having this conversation? People of a different creed are in power in places like Post-Everything University."

"What do you mean?" asked Peter.

"In our classes, nobody is allowed to criticize the secular humanist creed."

"Wait a moment," I said. "Go back two steps. Don, you said you wouldn't shut up people who disagree with you because in that case, if they ever got the power they might shut you up instead. Is that the only reason? If you had the power and you were sure of keeping it, then would it be okay to shut them up?"

He glanced at the others. "No," he said, "but I'm not sure why."

"Think it over."

After a few moments, he said, "There is a deeper reason. I'm trying to remember -- it was in an author you assigned -- a long time ago, in the first course I took with you. An early Christian writer. Lactose or something."

"Probably Lactantius. What about him?"

"He said there's a deeper reason. Because true faith can't be coerced."

Trying to suppress a smile, I handed him the book I had been carrying that morning and asked "Is this the book you're trying to remember?" It so happens that I teach that course often.

Astonished, he looked at the spine. "That's it, all right. Magic! What chapter was it where he talked about that?"

"Try Book 5, Chapter 20."

The chapters are short, so in a few seconds he found what he was looking for. He looked over at Peter and Theresa. "Um, do you all want me to read it out loud?"

"Do it," Peter said.

"Religion cannot be imposed by force. The matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected."

"Keep going," said Theresa.

"All right. 'Let them unsheath --'"

"Who's 'them'?" asked Peter.

"He means nonbelievers. 'Let them unsheath the weapon of their intellect; if their system is true, let it be asserted.'" And listen to this. 'For we do not entice, as they say; but we teach, we prove, we show.' A few lines down he says, 'For nothing is so much a matter of free-will as religion; in which, if the mind of the worshipper is disinclined to it, religion is at once taken away, and ceases to exist.'" A little self-consciously, Don laid the book on my desk.

"That's cool," Peter said. "When did you said that guy wrote?"

Don looked at me. "Fifth century?"

"Close. Fourth."

"Anyway," said Don, "I think he nails it. This guy lived under persecution, right, Prof? The pagans tried to shut the Christians up. He didn't say, 'If only we had the power instead.' He said, 'That's not the way power should be used. Faith can't be coerced.' And he told the pagans, 'Go ahead, show your stuff. Bring out your arguments, and I'll bring out mine. Let's see who's more convincing.'"□

"That's the problem with our angry and opinionated professors, isn't it?" asked Theresa. "It isn't their hatefulness. Or their offensiveness. Or the fact that they're against Christianity. It's that they don't allow argument."

"That's what I'm saying," said Don.

"Peter?" I asked.

"I agree. I take back what I said about offensiveness. Don and Reesi's answer is better."

"All right, group," I said. "I'll accept your answer to question one. The problem with the way the angry tribe of opinionated professors deal with opposing opinions is that they don't allow argument. Are you ready for question two?"

"I guess so," said Don. He glanced around for confirmation. The others nodded.

"Here's the question. What are you going to do about it?"

Theresa stalled. "What do you think we should do?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, c'mon, Prof," said Peter. "We were going to cross-examine you, remember? But you're cross-examining us."

"Give us a break," said Don.

"Since you ask," I said, "I think you should do what Lactantius did."

"You're being cryptic," said Peter.

"Not at all," I said. "Don, a moment ago weren't you telling us what Lactantius did?"

"Right. He challenged his adversaries to show their stuff."

"Well, then?"

"You can't mean for us to do that."

"Why not?"

Theresa answered for him. "We don't have enough stuff to show. Our professors know so much more than we do. That's why they're professors."

"They do know more," I answered, "but think back to the beginning of the conversation. You were explaining to me how Professor Egregious lives up to his name. Would you mind repeating what you said?"

"I said he never misses an opportunity to be insulting or obscene."

"You gave an example from this morning's class. His foul remarks about Mother Theresa."

"Yes, but don't ask me to repeat them. I don't even like to think about them."

"Of course you don't. And I won't. But when he made those remarks, was it his superior knowledge that put you at a disadvantage?"

"No. It was his filthiness."

"Then it wasn't your inferior knowledge that kept you from responding."

"What was I supposed to say?" she flashed. "You can't refute filthiness."

"No, but you can challenge it. You can deprive it of its power to intimidate."

"How?"

"Is it so hard to say 'Professor, obscenity is not an argument'?"

"He's got you there, Reesi," said Peter.

Turning to him, I asked mildly "How about you?"

"Me?" he squeaked.

"Sure. Why couldn't you challenge your professor -- Schlange, isn't it?"

He cleared his throat. "My case is, um, different."

"How is it different?"

"He doesn't use obscenity. He shuts people up with humiliation. I told you how he humiliated the pro-life girl in my class yesterday."

"Refresh my memory."

"He tore her down for five minutes, then asked, 'Would anyone else like to say anything?' Dead silence."

"Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't I what?"

"Say anything."

"You mean I should have subjected myself to that treatment?"

"No, I mean you should have contested that treatment. A good start might have been asking, 'Sir, how do sarcastic remarks about homo boobiens prove your case about abortion?'"

"As though that would shut up a bully like him."

"You'd be surprised. Professorial bullies are a lot like other bullies. They aren't prepared to be contradicted."

"And if it doesn't shut him up?"

"By pointing out that an insult isn't an argument, you put him in a dilemma. Either he presents you with a real argument -- that's what you want, isn't it? -- or he loses face."

"What difference does it make? I can't win by argument, even if my arguments are stronger. He controls the microphone."

"Who said you have to win?"

They glanced at each other again. I repeated the question. "Who said you have to win?"

Peter said, "I don't think I understand."

"Is the question difficult?"

"Isn't winning the point?"

"Certainly you should muster the best arguments you can; don't ever stop thinking that, not for a moment. But no, in a case like this winning isn't the point. The point is bearing witness."

"Now I'm even more confused," he answered.

I said, "So what if your professor isn't convinced? So what if he gets the last word? So what if he changes the subject? All you have to do is plant a seed."

Peter said, "But if the soil is rocky --"

"What do we know about which soils are rocky and which ones aren't? Does God tell us what uses He plans to make of our obedience?"

Unexpectedly, his face was crossed by emotion. "If I'd spoken up this morning -- I wasn't even thinking of that girl."

"The one your professor tore down?"

He nodded. In the corner of my eye I noticed that some obscure passion had imprinted itself on Don's face too.

"Aren't we a pack of mice," said Theresa. "In other parts of the world Christians die for their faith, and here we are, scared witless, just because a few opinionated professors might sneer at us in front of our classmates."

Don said, "We ought to find it easy to bear our crosses."

"I don't think that line of thought is helpful," I said. "Your crosses are real crosses; if they weren't, you wouldn't be so afraid to carry them. Don't worry about how light or heavy they are compared with the crosses other people bear. I'm not saying that you should dramatize your burdens, but you shouldn't disparage them either."

"I guess you're right," he said. "These are the crosses we're given. We just have to bear them."

"That, and one more thing."

"What?"

I didn't have to give the answer; Peter did. "To help all the others bear theirs."

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