

The Angry Tribe of Opinionated Professors, Part 1 of 2

I usually skip lunch, but I needed the break, so I decided to try out the new food court in the atrium of Mammon Hall, the glass and marble business school building. There wasn't much variety -- a Starblunks, another Starblunks and a MacBurger's -- but I gave in, got myself a burger and coffee, and looked around the room. Just as I despaired of finding a place to sit, I heard someone calling "Prof! Professor Theophilus!" Glancing in the direction of the voice, I saw Don, standing and waving with both arms. He was with Theresa and Peter, who were busy clearing a place at their table. It took me a few minutes to make my way to them through the crowd.

"Thanks," I told them. "There are so many people here I thought I'd have to eat standing up."

"Don't thank us yet," said Peter. "We're going to make you work for that chair."

"Fair enough --considering how I make you work for your grades. What will you make me do, bus tables?"

"Worse," said Theresa. "We're going to cross-examine you."

"Am I in court, counselor?"

"That depends on what we think of your answers, witness. And we're not lawyers. We're judges."

"Sounds ominous."

"It should," said Don. "We're pretty steamed."

"At whom?"

"At the whole angry tribe of opinionated professors."

"Should I put on my war paint and feathers now?"

"Not you. You're okay. I'm talking about some of your opinionated colleagues."

"You mean some of them are even more opinionated than I am?"

"It isn't *whether* they're opinionated but *how* they're opinionated," said Peter.

"How are they opinionated?"

Peter looked surprised. "Don't you know?"

"I know how they strike *me*, but I'm not a student. How do they strike *you*?"

"They strike me as hateful," Don replied.

"Odious." Theresa this time.

"Morally obtuse." That was Peter again. "Like that professor in Colorado. The one who compared the 9/11 victims with Adolph Eichmann."

"Yes, I've heard of him. He's all over the news. But I thought you were going to complain about our own faculty."

"We are," said Theresa. "Do you know Muito Egregious, the Spanish and Portuguese teacher?"

"Only by reputation."

"Well, I'm a Spanish major, and I can't avoid taking his courses."

"Does he live up to his name?"

"Sure does. He never misses an opportunity to be insulting or obscene --if possible, both at once. What he said this morning about Mother Theresa was unspeakable. I wish I could clean out my memory with soap."

"You think you've got it bad," said Don. "My Modern European teacher, Peccata Mundi, is a woman with a mission. Did you know that Christianity is responsible for all of the evils of the world? No? Well, that's what *she* says. Oppression of women? We did it. Slavery? Our fault. The Holocaust? We did that too, according to her. Stalin's purges? Before becoming a Communist, Stalin was a seminary student, so again we're to blame. Terrorism? We're just getting what we deserve."

"I can top that," said Peter. "My public policy professor, Prentice Schlange, isn't just nuts -- he's a sadist. Yesterday he opened class by saying, 'All of you here are too

intelligent to be pro-life, right?' A girl in front of me said, 'I'm pro-life.' He tore her down for five minutes."

"You didn't tell us about that," said Theresa. "What did he say?"

"He figured her reasons were religious, so the first thing he did was label her a 'fundamentalist.' It was downhill from there on. A lot of his diatribe was recycled quotations from other people. I recognized a couple of them, like H.L. Mencken's line about uneducable people who belong to the species *homo boobiens*. By the time my teacher was finished, the girl was in tears. Then he asked, 'Would anyone else like to say anything?' Of course no one else did, so he smiled nastily and said to her, 'It seems that you're a minority of one.'"

I raised a judicial eyebrow. "Are you saying that all of your teachers are like these three?"

"Yes and no," replied Theresa. "Not many faculty are that extreme. On the other hand, there's a persistent left-wing, anti-religious bias in almost all of our classes. Sometimes mild, sometimes not."

"Make that anti-*Christian* bias," said Peter. "They hardly ever criticize, say, Hinduism or New Age religiosity."

Don said, "Unless you already know the material being taught, though, it's hard to pin it down. A lot of students don't even notice a bias. They don't have anything to compare it with."

"I wouldn't say that," said Peter. "Most of them notice, but they just don't care. You know what I mean. 'Give me my degree and I'm out of here.'"

"But a lot of them do care," said Theresa. "They just don't know what they can do about it."

A silence fell. They seemed to expect me to say something. I asked, "Is this where my cross-examination begins?"

Theresa said, "That was just joking. But as a professor, you must have noticed the bias too."

"Of course. You should sit in on a faculty meeting sometime."

They laughed. "I guess your views aren't exactly common here," said Don.

"They're not as uncommon as they used to be."

"You mean there's a backlash?" he asked.

"I wouldn't put it so strongly. But there are cracks in the monolith."

"So how do *you* deal with opinionated professors?"

"That's not the right question, Don. I don't confront them as a student but as a colleague, as a fellow member of the faculty. The face that the problem presents to me is not quite the same as the face that it presents to you, and the means available to you for dealing with it are not quite the same as the means available to me."

"Okay, how can *we* deal with bias?"

"How large an answer to you want?"

He answered, "How large an answer do you have time for?"

I glanced at my watch and smiled ruefully. "Not very large."

"Okay, let's make the question smaller," said Theresa. "Just tell us how we can deal with teachers like Eggeious, Mundi and Schlange."

"All right," I replied. "To start with, tell me what it is about their behavior that you find so objectionable."

They looked at each other. "Isn't that obvious?" asked Peter.

"Pretend I'm stupid. The problem is --what? What kind of statements on their part are you objecting to?"

"Statements like the ones we told you about."

"Then characterize these statements."

"Haven't we done that? They're opinionated. Like we said."

"That won't do, Peter. As you also said, the problem isn't *whether* they're opinionated but *how* they're opinionated."

"But they shouldn't be laying their points of view on us."

"If having a point of view is what you're objecting to, then your objection is hopeless. Every teacher has a point of view. It's impossible to teach and *not* have a point of view."

Don said, "Shouldn't our teachers be teaching us the *facts*?"

I answered, "The *goal* is to arrive at the factual, certainly. But there is no getting around the fact that at least at the beginning, there are different opinions about what the facts *are*. So don't complain to me that Professors Egregious, Mundi and Schlange have opinions. Tell me what's wrong with the way that they *deal* with opinions."

"They're hateful," said Don.

I smiled. "You know, I've been accused of being hateful too."

"You? But you're a Christian. You're *against* hatred."

"I am."

"Who accused you?" asked Theresa.

"A student who wandered in during Q&A, following a talk I gave several years ago at the Student Union. The talk was about Constitutional liberties, and someone asked a question about laws that forbid discrimination on the basis of 'sexual orientation.' I remarked that 'sexual orientation' can mean many things, and I wondered where this trend would end."

"I was there," said Peter. "So?"

"The student came to my office afterward. Very bitter fellow. He accused me of a bizarre statement I hadn't made, told me I was bigoted and hateful, and said he was going to file a formal complaint with the people who run the Student Union speakers series."

"Did he?"

"I've never checked."

"Were you ever invited to speak at the Union again?"

"Of course not. Do you get my point?"

"I think so. Real hatred is wrong, but in today's climate, false accusations of hatred are too easy to use to censor opinions that people don't want to hear."

"Right. That's the adversary's game. If I were you, I'd avoid getting caught up in it."

"So where does that leave us?" asked Theresa

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