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Putting John on Trial:

Teaching Christology by Using the Classroom as a Courtroom

My purpose today is to share the results of an experiment I conducted and to suggest ways it could be improved and reproduced. In a 200-level course called “Christian Beliefs” at a Saint Louis University, a Catholic institution, I staged a mock trial. All students in the class were assigned to read the Gospel of John with an eye for how its author portrayed Christ’s nature. From among the thirty students, I asked for four volunteers, two each for two competing teams, the defense and prosecution. The defense was charged with summarizing John’s Christology and with making the case that this was the correct view of Christ’s nature. The prosecution could agree or disagree with the defense’s summation of Johannine Christology, but needed to attack the assumption that John’s view of Christ was a correct one by presenting at least one alternative. I, the instructor, served as the judge, while the remaining students in the class served as the jury.

Before further elaborating the details of the trial’s set-up and its outcome, I should offer both a disclaimer and a full explanation of my motivation. First, the disclaimer. This was the first college level course that I had taught; and, thanks to the throes of dissertation writing and some logistical shenanigans, this remains the only college course that I have taught. I offer you, therefore, not the fruit of long years of experience or a lesson that has been tested and refined, but rather an out-side-the-box, first-time attempt at doing something out of the ordinary. Dominating a full week of the course, it was not efficient. However, it was memorable and effective. It needed to be, as the following account will demonstrate.

I assigned “reaction essays” every week, a certain total number of which each student needed to complete for the semester. Typically, the essay question for any given week concerned an as-yet unaddressed topic, so that I could gauge students’ level of prior familiarity and reflect on their views before delving into the topic during our class time. The topic of Christology yielded one of the worst essays of the semester. I quote its opening paragraph here, not in hopes of eliciting a sort of academic *Schadenfreude*, but rather to illustrate just how high the stakes were. (The student author will, of course, remain anonymous.) The student wrote:

“I feel that my Christology is that I am a human and nothing more. I am not divine, or three persons in one human. [...] I am not a divine being sent from god. I was born as human.”

That was the student’s Christology. It had nothing to do with Christ; rather, it expressed the student’s understanding of himself. I had hoped to do the trial anyway – because it would be interesting and messy and fun – but now I knew I had to, so that my students would, as the bare minimum of theological literacy achieved at a Catholic university, know what Christology was, whether or not they could articulate, much less agree with the Christology of John. The Gospel writer would provide us a case study, the grist for argument, with ample material for both the more advanced students... and for the more theologically challenged.

As for the trial itself, the assignment was simple. The defense and prosecution, each comprised of two students, would be pitted against each other. After three-or-so weeks of possible preparation, the day of the trial itself took place during our once-a-week, two-and-a-half hour evening class. Which team went first was determined by a coin toss. They had ten to fifteen minutes to present their case, immediately followed by five to ten minutes of

questions by the other team, and then an equal amount of time for questions by the class-at-large, i.e., the jury. Then the second team had its turn. One of the members of the jury kept time, freeing me to focus on the discussion at hand. I took a hands-off approach, refraining from intervening as judge during the teams' presentations and questioning. It was only in moderating the jury's deliberations that I became actively involved in the process. My primary role was to design the initial trial scenario. I had been prepared to jump into the fray of the primary arguments, but did not deem it necessary as the trial unfolded.

Both teams were to rely on the Gospel of John as their only primary source. They could marshal any and every possible piece of evidence to support their views, ranging from academic scholarship to their grandmothers, provided that they kept in mind their purpose: to persuade the members of the jury of the strength of their argument. The task of the members of the jury was to decide which side had the stronger argument, not which side they believed to be correct. Members of the defense and prosecution were to wait outside during deliberations.

How did it go? The prosecution won the coin toss and elected to go second. The defense opened with a Power Point summarizing their understanding of John's Christology. I cringed a bit, as the team emphasized Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity. In a subsequent class session, I would contend that John's Gospel presented a compelling articulation of Christ's dual divinity and humanity; however, my task in the moment was not to present my own argument, so I held my tongue. The defense framed their conclusions as what they personally believed but could not prove.

The prosecution effectively eviscerated the defense. They waxed technical, rooting their argument in concrete information, arguing for a late date for the Gospel text, undermining the credibility of both its author and the opposing team. Jesus was human and

human only; that was the prosecution's argument and their consistency and clarity carried much weight with the jury.

It wasn't that the juror's agreed with them. Far from it. But once the members of the jury realized the full implications of their assignment – to choose the most persuasive team, not the team that they believed to be correct – voting became relatively easy. The prosecution won handily. However dubious the supposed facts they presented – that John was non-canonical, for example – the prosecution presented an ostensibly fact-based, rather than faith-based argument.

The trial was a high risk, high reward situation. The weight of carrying the discussion rested squarely on the students' shoulders. They rose to the occasion, eager to debate their own interpretations of Christ's nature. Had they failed to present compelling arguments, it would have been a dull and wearisome two hours. As things played out, the students' level of commitment to the assignment, from the prosecution and defense to the members of the jury, made the assignment a success. However, there were notable shortcomings for which I was entirely responsible. I will highlight three.

First, I made an unambiguous rookie mistake by not limiting the possible sources students could use. By allowing the teams to use every source at their disposal, I opened the possibility for wildly divergent and confusing interpretations of John, including those with little basis in the text. (I do not mean to exclude a multiplicity of valid interpretations.) In the future, should I have the opportunity to implement an updated version of the trial, I will select clear secondary sources for both sides to use. I will also present the students a common core of facts, which the both teams can assume to be true for the purposes of the debate. In so doing, I can ensure that the debate will be more theological than historical and text-critical in nature; for, although such aspects of the debate were interesting, they simply

raised more issues than we could effectively and responsibly address in a single lesson. The primary question for the trial should have been “Was Jesus fully God and fully man?” not “When and by whom was John written?” In the words of one of the jurors, “To the audience, it seemed as though both sides only sought out biased information on the topic in order to support their side, rather than understanding both sides of the topic so they could have a well-rounded and complete argument.”

Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you may be good religion, but it isn't always good pedagogy, especially when you are a fourth-year doctoral student and most of your own students are college sophomores; I did them no favors by giving them maximum freedom. This was especially apparent during the jury's questioning of the prosecution, when one juror with a laptop started citing Wikipedia.

A second major area for improvement was my involvement in the trial itself. I could have and should have taken action in my capacity as judge, especially during students' questioning of the two teams, rather than remain silent as a keenly interested bystander. I had a critical opportunity to keep discussion on track, entertaining objections and overriding irrelevant detours from the matter at hand. As things were, I was more interested in seeing how things would unfold without my intervention, but I now realize that this was not ultimately the most helpful for the trial process.

A third shortcoming was not a mistake, per se, but it was a definite down-side: the issue of post-trial theological damage control. While the trial elicited significant student participation and exposed the class to two alternate views of Johannine Christology, the trial provided no opportunity for me to articulate orthodox doctrine and its standard alternatives *without violating the integrity of the trial process*. As a result, I spent the next several lessons explaining the orthodox Christology, orthodox interpretations of John, the variations, and

deviations; doing so sufficiently in the context of a presentation as brief as that afforded by the trial is outside the capabilities of most theologians, undergraduate or otherwise, myself included. However, by beginning the unit on Christology with the trial, I insured that the students – defense, prosecution, and jury alike – were personally engaged in the debate, because they knew that their voices were being heard.

In retrospect, this was perhaps the most important aspect of the trial. I did not fully appreciate this at the time, but the trial came at a critical juncture in the course, one month into the semester, a point by which most students in most classes seem either to decide to irrevocably commit to not caring about the course or decide to be personally invested on some level. The jury’s deliberations represented both the first great discussion we had that semester and, in many ways, the best discussion of the semester. But I recognize that from that point forward, the tenor of class discussion changed for the better. While I graded students on the basis of their arguments’ clarity, just as they decided on the winning team on the basis of persuasiveness, we increasingly spent class time asking the question “What is true?”

After the trial, all of the students had the opportunity to write an essay about the experience. I gave them the option of choosing between two different questions. In the first, I simply asked what could have been improved about the trial, resulting in many of the suggestions I have listed above. One suggestion I have not yet mentioned would be to assign non-defense and non-prosecution students to prepare questions for both of those teams to answer. My second post-trial essay question for the class was an extension of jury deliberations – “Which team won and why?” – providing an additional opportunity for proponents of the minority position to fully articulate their reasons, vent their frustration, and be heard. In the case of both essay topics, students had a chance to critique me directly

and this seemed to lend itself to a class atmosphere that was theologically earnest, relationally engaged, and emotionally relaxed.

By putting John's Christology on trial, my students honed a working definition of Christology in general, began to explore John's Christology in particular, and developed clear communication and persuasive argumentation in an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. Although I did not grade jurors on trial participation directly, but rather on the reaction essays they wrote about the experience, the project elicited active participation from much of the class. While the first run of this mock trial occurred during a single two-and-a-half hour class period, future versions of the trial could easily be broken down into two or three shorter periods, with a day given to each of the teams. This lesson erred on the side of being more interesting than efficient. If a comparable simulation could be of use to you, I offer my humble example of what to do and what not to do.