

What's Faith Got to Do With it? A Response to Philip L. Tite, *Teaching with Faith Crisis*

Samuel M. Powell

Professor of Philosophy and Religion

Co-Director of Graduate Studies in Religion

Point Loma Nazarene University

Philip Tite's essay, "Teaching with Faith Crisis: A Summary of 'On the Necessity of Crisis'," takes a phenomenon that everyone on higher education is familiar with—crises of faith in the midst of and often as a result of learning—and finds something of value in what many of us regard primarily as a problem fraught with anxiety about the ecclesiastical repercussions. His thesis is that "learning is enhanced by such moments [of crisis]— indeed, that such moments are vital learning opportunities within religious studies classrooms." This is a message that we who are associated with confessionally-connected universities, both professors and constituents, can profit from. Professors, of course, even in Christian universities, may be expected to welcome this thesis, since our work inevitably involves provoking, intentionally or not, such crises of faith. Whether the churches that support Christian universities will be as uniformly accepting is doubtful, since the act of bringing about crises of faith does not appear, to the untrained eye, to agree very well with the Christian university's role of helping to preserve the faith once delivered to the saints.

On the way to establishing his thesis, Tite engages us with some thoughts on the place of methodological reductionism in the non-confessional university. His remarks are, in my opinion, correct and judicious, especially in his view that academic discourse "is reductive in its delimitation of epistemological boundary construction [with the result that] insider truth claims are no longer explained away [as in positivistic forms of reductionism], but simply explained." This is an important point, for it establishes the legitimacy of academic discourse and also reveals the nature of the knowledge generated by academic discourse. In short, academic work consists in specifying a certain range of phenomena and then using appropriate methods to investigate the phenomena. Because of this, no academic discipline can legitimately claim to have a comprehensive view of any subject. It is in this sense that academic discourse may explain religion without explaining it away, at least when the practitioners of this discourse are attentive to the limitations that Tite has elaborated. As he explains, the delimiting activity of reductionism implies that "the secular university is not in the position to make normative claims, to explore transhistorical, *sui generis* essences. Such searches for metaphysical claims lay beyond the domain of our discourse." As a result, "The goal is not to establish truth (or "Truth"), but rather to locate and explain verifiable truth that *can* be discovered" by the prevailing methods.

I've gone into some detail on this point because scholars in Christian universities are subject to two temptations. First, in the desire to imitate their colleagues in secular universities, they may make exaggerated claims about the powers of their disciplines. Second, mindful of the dangers of this attitude, they may draw back from the methods of their secular counterparts and hope for a distinctively Christian method in their chosen fields. To these temptations we may (on the basis of Tite's argument) respond, first, that Christian scholars are obligated to use the prevailing methods in their fields, since no one has ever successfully shown that there is, outside theology perhaps, a distinctively Christian method and, second, that Christian scholars above all should be on guard against the imperious tendencies of modern academic studies.

Tite's argument for the pedagogical value of crises of faith is grounded in his understanding of developmental psychology and its application to university education. Briefly put, the point is that "such crisis moments are part of the cognitive process by which individuals move from stages of literal (mythic) thinking to higher levels of critical cognitive processes." In other words, if our students are to become cognitively mature, it is necessary that they leave behind modes of thinking appropriate to children and adolescents. But leaving them behind implies crisis and conflict within the student's awareness. In Tite's view, which I heartily endorse, crises of faith are no more avoidable on the road to maturity than are the other developmental traumas that each of us undergoes as necessary parts of becoming adults. The necessity of which I speak is not lessened in just because education takes place in a Christian university. It is true that professors at a Christian university will be more sympathetic to the student's pre-critical modes of cognition and perhaps less impatient with their native faith than will be professors in secular universities. It is also true that a Christian university will offer greater support systems for the student as he or she undergoes this crisis. However, the emotional and intellectual effects of the crisis can be

ameliorated only so much, even in a Christian context. A crisis is a crisis, no matter how sympathetic the professor who occasions it and how great the support system surrounding the student.

Finally, I appreciated Tite's comment that "the classroom functions as a type of *communitas*. Our function as teachers is not to nullify the rite of passage, nor to normatively present our type of cognition at the delegitimization of mythic or normative modes of cognition. Rather, our function is to be assistants in guiding students through their intellectual formation, regardless of where that formation may lead them. In other words, our task is not to avoid nor ignore the crisis moments, but rather to facilitate a context (a "learning community") for the transitional motion of our students within and through the process of such crisis moments." This states very clearly and forcefully the role of the professor, not only in the secular university but also in Christian universities. To put the matter in platonic terms, we function for the students as midwives, helping them bring to birth their maturity. It is not something that we can give them in the way in which we can lecture to them about facts and theories. It is also not something that lies inherent within them, for without us (or someone else providing the same function), they most likely will not develop cognitively in the direction of maturity. On the contrary their intellectual growth is something that occurs in the relationship between student and teacher and in the learning context that the professor and university provide. It is my hope that every Christian university will endorse the sorts of ideas that Tite has expressed. Without their acceptance and application, we may excel in the transfer of information, but we will fail in the business of forming human beings.

What's Faith Got to Do With it?
A Response to Philip L. Tite,
Teaching with Faith Crisis
By Samuel M. Powell
Professor of Philosophy and Religion
Co-Director of Graduate Studies in Religion
Point Loma Nazarene University