

TEACHING WITH FAITH CRISIS: A SUMMARY OF “ON THE NECESSITY OF CRISIS” [1]

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The prevention of free inquiry is unavoidable so long as the purpose of education is to produce belief rather than thought, to compel the young to hold positive opinions on doubtful matters rather than to let them see the doubtfulness and be encouraged to independence of mind.
(Russell 1997: 107)

With this statement the noted British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, set forth a radically new pedagogical perspective for the twentieth century. Underlying such a statement – that education should foster thought rather than blind adherence to a national or ideological system – is the implicit value of “doubtfulness” in the classroom. That is, struggling with thinking, or new ways of thinking, should be a significant and even beneficial aspect of learning. What follows is a simple summary of an article I recently published on the pedagogical value of faith crisis moments in the religious studies classroom. Many of us who teach in higher education have faced such crisis moments; both while going through the education process itself as well as watching our students struggle with the learning process. Rather than seeing such crisis moments as impediments to learning, I would like to argue that learning is enhanced by such moments – indeed, that such moments are vital learning opportunities within religious studies classrooms.

Crisis moments involving faith commitments tend to be dismissed in pedagogical reflection and practice, despite their inevitability in practical settings. Some dismiss crisis moments by defusing those very moments (taking on the role of a tradition’s “caretaker”). Others have adopted the opposite position, negating the very validity of those moments, claiming that an objective reduction of religion to an object of study allows no room for childish, non-critical feelings of discomfort in the classroom. Both approaches, in my opinion, fail as pedagogically viable strategies for student development.

My discussion will fall into three sections, each developing the claim that faith crisis moments are valuable learning opportunities that we as teachers should nurture. First, I will outline the delimitation of the (secular) university, establishing that knowable knowledge construction within critical thinking is the goal of the learning process. Second, I will discuss this mode of cognition within the context of stages of development or rites of passage, arguing that crisis moments emerge from shifts in ways of thinking. Thirdly, and finally, I will explore the place of such crisis moments within a collaborative pedagogical paradigm.

Reductive Limitation in the Secular University

The university is a social space that, like all social spaces, is limited by its very discourse. Such delimitation is necessary for a discourse to be functional. Within what frameworks do we teach, within what limitations? I would suggest that our discourse emerges within a reductive framework. Reductionism, of course, has been one of those “naughty” words within religious studies, with a perennial debate within the field between reductionists and non-reductionists. The type of reductionism I would advocate, not only for research but also for teaching, is not ontological reduction but rather a type of methodological reduction.

When religious data (i.e., insider truth claims) are explicitly dismissed, or explained away, by means of reducing such claims to the realm of the social, psychological, or economical, then insider concerns over academic threats to faith are indeed warranted (and not uncommon from our students; see Whitcombe 2001). With such a positivistic approach to religion (“gods are merely projections of wishful thinking, or an outgrowth of economic or class conflict”) we are dealing with ontological reduction.

However, when academic discourse, and especially when such discourse is conducted within learning communities, is reductive in its delimitation of epistemological boundary construction, then insider truth claims are no longer explained away, but simply explained. Such explanatory theorization of insider truth claims ceases to be a direct threat to faith commitments, indeed any form of normative commitments. Such reduction (reduction for the sake of analysis) has been called methodological reduction (see Arnal 2000; Baird 1991; Braun 2000, 2001; Carter 1998;

Fitzgerald 1999; McCutcheon 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 2001; Smith 1978, 1996, 1998, 2000; Tite forthcoming, 2000, 2001, 2003; Young 1992; Wiebe 1994, 1999).

Such a delimitation or reduction of the discourse of the university (including the classroom) is a process of (self-)defining our learning communities, establishing an intellectual space for addressing, or creating, "knowable knowledge" rather than metaphysical or absolute knowledge.[2] What is higher learning? Contrary to phenomenological approaches to the study of religion (see the helpful work by Sharma 2001 on the nature of phenomenology of religion and philosophical phenomenology; see also James 1995; Merker 1996; and Sharpe 1986: 220-250), 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, though perhaps not the discourse of those who are also engaged in theological formulations. A central problem with normative claims (be those theological or political-activistic in nature) is the issue of verification. A critical-analytical approach necessitates that knowledge be verifiable (and falsifiable) in some plausible way (though not limited to empirical analysis, which is also problematic). Logical argumentation is built on the process of falsification and verification, which establish and play out the game rules or theory-building criteria. Such claims, I would be quick to add, do not negate absolute truth claims (e.g., God exists and Christ is the Son of God) or other normative claims (e.g., every human has intrinsic value, killing is wrong, love is good). The goal is not to establish truth (or "Truth"), but rather to locate and explain verifiable truth that *can* be discovered. Such a delimitation of knowledge to knowable knowledge construction (placing such knowledge within the frameworks of social and cultural processes of meaningfulness) is what is meant by methodological reduction. The reduction is only valid within the context of a scholarly discourse, be that a problem solving solution to an analytical inquiry or the classroom setting of fostering such critical thinking.

Cognitive Development and Rites of Passage in the Learning Process

Given the self-limitations of the academic study of religion, it is vital that we recognize the presence of conflict within the university learning process. The moment of crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, 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. Psychologists have long taught that human beings grow through various stages of development: moral development, stages of sexual and social growth, among other more narrowly focused aspect of the human life cycle. There are, of course, at least two problems with such developmental theories. First, there is the danger of rendering such stages essentialized stages, especially given the cultural and social particularity that is obscured in essentialist systems. Second, there is the danger of an evolutionary view of development: the higher stages tend to be seen as superior to the lower ones. When placed within the context of developing critical thinking skills regarding religious and cultural beliefs and practices, we need to be careful not to place faith-oriented cognition and analytical-oriented cognition within an evolutionary framework, and, furthermore, we need to be careful not to obscure cultural and epistemological specificity by means of an essentialist view of human cultures and religions.

Developmental theories, however, can still be useful for understanding the pedagogical problem of faith crisis within the classroom setting. In her insightful article, which largely builds off of James W. Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981), Marianne Sawicki (1984) argued that students struggle with accepting symbolic concepts due to being in a stage of critical rather than conjunctive cognition. She claims that there are heuristically four stages of cognitive growth for students who (especially) come from faith-oriented traditions. There are literal, conventional, critical, and finally conjunctive modes of understanding. Whereas the literal functions as the level of a child in seeing the mythic and concrete as synonymous realities, the critical would demarcate the two with the mythic being false reality and the concrete the real (conventional, of course, being the transitional stage of tension between the literal and critical). Conjunctive thought emerges with the maturity to reintegrate the opposing realities in a dialectical dynamic—in a sense an informed naiveté. According to Sawicki, this fourth stage of cognition only emerges around the age of 30. The typical university student is, instead, at the natural stage of being, in her words, a 20-year old demythologizer.

Such a perspective on stages of cognitive development is insightful for explaining crisis moments. We need to be sensitive to the fact that students are developing those critical skills that we as teachers and scholars may take as obvious methods and frameworks of scholarship. We must also recall that students will develop at various paces, with diverse periods of what Jerome Bruner once

called “a staircase with rather sharp risers...a matter of spurts and rests” (1968: 27). It is in such “spurts and rests” that students face crisis moments of cognitive dissonance. Such dissonance occurs, I would contend, due to a type of “paradigm” shift: we are asking our students to think differently, to engage their world(s) with non-normative ethical evaluations by working through critical-analytical frameworks (i.e., to recognize the socially constructed nature of knowledge, the politics underlying epistemological frameworks of knowledge construction, and to learn to perceive the world through diverse epistemological lenses). Even beyond seeing students struggle with thinking in new ways within the classroom, and thereby generating crisis moments, it might be helpful to recognize that different students will face such moments when confronted with particular areas of study. While some students will struggle with critical thinking in relation to, for example, biblical studies, in other contexts, such as church history or the study of other religious traditions, or even other disciplines such as philosophy or literature, these same students will be very comfortable with critical thinking. In other words, crisis moments tend to be contingent upon those areas of discourse that are most fundamental to a particular person at a particular point in his or her life.[3]

Another helpful analogy for understanding cognitive stages of dissonance would be the perspective of ritual acts, specifically rites of passage.[4] Rites of passage mark moments of change; they indicate shifts in direction, movement from one “place” (*locus*) to another. According to Victor Turner (1964) and Arnold van Gennep (1960) rites of passage comprise three basic stages: separation, margin (*limen*), and aggregation. This three-fold model of movement highlights the movement from point A to C by means of a point of liminality (B). Liminality, as the threshold of transitional ambiguity, is infused with danger and potential for moving in various or diverse directions and perhaps no direction at all. It is a stage of crisis, and a necessary one for entering into a new place socially or developmentally. I would see faith crisis moments as a form of intellectual (perhaps even existential) liminality. Students transition from one cognitive space to another cognitive space. The transition is not an evolutionary improvement from a “primitive” form of cognition (faith) to a more “mature” cognitive process (critical thinking), but rather a movement from *one type of cognition to another type of cognition*. What we are faced with is differing, and seemingly conflicting, ways of knowing, in conjunction with the *movement* from one way of knowing to another way of knowing. Such movement is, by analogy, very much a type of “rite of passage.” Pedagogically, 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.

Collaborative Pedagogy and the Necessity of Crisis

Within the classroom, I have tried to foster a collaborative pedagogical approach. Rather than seeing the classroom as *my* classroom, with the focus and structure of the course revolving around myself as instructor, I strongly believe that the best learning occurs when we see ourselves as *co-learners* with our students. A shared ownership of the classroom within which there is a mutual process of contributing to the learning process is, for me, the key to creating a vibrant setting filled with vitality and growth – not only for the students, but also for the instructor. Such a process is to empower our students to take responsibility for their own learning. Indeed, I see my role as teacher less that of the all-knowing expert disseminating my great wisdom to my intellectual inferiors (after all the classroom is not a conference session!), but rather as a facilitator of a community of learning.[5] When we take such a collaborative paradigm seriously (and, of course, I think we should), then the question naturally arises: is a “shared ownership” approach to learning compatible with reductive limitations on our classroom discourse, and, furthermore, does such an approach allow us to “mark” cognitive rites of passage?

First, we must recognize the role of power in the classroom. Regardless of the educational philosophy that we may prefer (the older *tabula rasa* paradigm or the newer collaborative paradigm), power and authority play a role. As teachers, we are in positions of authority: establishing the syllabus, assigning grades, offering extensions on assignments, etc.[6] Power can have a negative role in the classroom, notably if that power is used to either reinforce a dogmatic worldview (religious, political, or national) or reinforce the egocentric (or narcissistic) self-identity of the instructor (see on the former Russell 1997: 103, and on the latter, Hess 2003). Power may also have a positive, transformative role for fostering communities of learning. As Russell indicated

(1997: 103; cf. 1994), authority can enable the teacher to be a guide in the formation of the student “without infringing on the principle of liberty.” The key, of course, is to utilize power as a guiding, rather than dominating, device.

Second, we must recognize the mutual delimitation of both students and teachers within reductive analytical frameworks. Methodological reduction, especially when applied to the classroom, functions to establish the boundaries of our learning environment, to establish the game rules and parameters of our discourse in order to enable the emergence of an actual community of learning. Such delimitation not only limits students, but also teachers, so that both are challenged to critique and theorize normative claims. Within such mutual delimitation insider truth claims (e.g., “Christ died for our sins” or “heterosexism is dehumanizing”) personal experience can play a vital role within the classroom. It has been argued that bringing experience into the classroom enriches the learning environment (see, e.g., Wells 2001: 171-172; Weiler 1988; Jackson 1999; Hogan, Nastasi, and Pressley 1999). Not only does experience allow learning to carry relevance for the learner, but also to encourage the learner to become more engaged and interested in participating within a community of learning. Experience, however, does not mean that a “free for all” need occur in the classroom. Rather, through reductive limitation of the learning process for fostering critical thinking, both the teacher and the student are encouraged to treat such experiences (along with other insider truth claims) as first-order data that needs to be theorized within second-order explanatory frameworks, thereby rendering such data knowable knowledge. Such a framework of data construction and data theorization may help move *both* students and teachers beyond normative claims within the classroom.

Encouraging such a learning setting will undoubtedly result in crisis moments, not only for those with religious beliefs but also for those who hold other strong normative claims (ethical, political, etc.). Indeed, instructors themselves may be challenged to think critically about some of their own sacred cows or normative convictions. Crisis moments need not, however, be unfortunate or problematic events. Indeed, as I have attempted to argue these very moments are positive indications of learning. Learning, that is, through struggles with differing modes of thinking. The differing modes of cognition are not better or worse in comparison, but rather are alternative means of perceiving and engaging the world. Personally, I believe that a critical mode of thinking can be especially valuable for allowing normative modes of thought to take on more engaging, thoughtful and mature expressions of interacting with the issues and decisions that students will face within their broader world. For those students who decide that developing critical-analytical skills is important, we as instructors should be actively involved in helping them to move through this process, to encourage them to engage those moments, to take them seriously as opportunities of profound growth and moments of liminal discovery.

A Final Word

In writing the above article, first for a Teaching Workshop and then for publication and now for this issue of *Didache: Faithful Teaching*, I was continually reminded of the faith crisis moments that I had seen not only while teaching sessionally at McGill University (2000-2003), and before that as a Teaching Assistant at both McGill and Wilfrid Laurier University, but also while an undergraduate and graduate student. Indeed, my very first university course was an Introduction to the New Testament at the University of Toronto back in 1988. I watched as with tears a student explained to the professor the need to drop the course due to such dissonance. At Olivet Nazarene University I also encountered several students who were struggling with similar issues. I also went through such a process, feeling at times that I was living in two distinct worlds – one academic the other normative or faith-centred. Some may refer to these struggles as growing pains, and indeed they felt very much like that.

As a teacher I've been at times frustrated by such moments in my students. Perhaps the frustration has been even more centred on my wish to help – indeed to “fix” – my students. These experiences, along with discussions with others who have dealt with such moments with students, prompted me to develop the ideas in this article. By the time I sat down to flesh out these thoughts on paper, I had already been outside the Nazarene educational system for several years, now well established within a more secular institutional setting. My reflections were very much limited to that secular context. Crisis moments were not limited to those with a religious faith, but also those students with strong beliefs in ethical or social issues (such as gay rights, feminist concerns, or political views on, for example, issues of peace and violence). However, I never forgot that even within faith-oriented institutions such crisis moments arise (and arise not as exceptional cases but, I would argue, more regularly than we may recognize). Rather than attempt to enter

into the dynamics that a faith-oriented institution might add to understanding such crisis moments, I limited myself to what I had encountered in my own university. I am very appreciative to Dean Blevins for organizing this issue of the journal for pushing these ideas into the “non-secular” domain. It was my hope to foster a dialogue with others, to attempt to raise issues and learn from the experiences of others. It is with such a collegial and discursive intention that I have prepared this summary article for readers of *Didache: Faithful Teaching*.

Notes

[1] This article is a summary of my, “On the Necessity of Crisis: A Reflection on Pedagogical Conflict and the Academic Study of Religion,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 6.2 (2003): 76-84, and is used with the kind permission of the *TTR*'s editors and Blackwell Publishing. An earlier version had been presented at a Teaching Workshop at McGill University, November 12, 2001. I wish to express a word of appreciate to Dean Blevins for his organizing this symposium discussion around the ideas in this piece for *Didache: Faithful Teaching*.

[2] It should be noted that my delimitation of the goal of the university is specifically focussed towards the *secular* university. Unlike church-related institutions, such as seminaries and denominational liberal arts universities as well as Bible colleges, the secular university is “accountable” only to the academic world and not to a confessional body. Denominational institutions (such as those Nazarene institutions of higher learner) are not only accountable to the broader academic world, but also to their own faith traditions. Consequently, although many who teach within faith-oriented institutions work with the same tools and theoretical frameworks as those of secular institutions (and this whole “secular” and “non-secular” divide is blurred in many institutions), perhaps faith crisis moments are intensified by the “multi-community” accountability of faith-oriented institutions. It is my hope that my symposium interlocutors will help to push my discussion in the direction of addressing some of those specific dynamics of faith crisis. Two useful articles discussing a theologically based philosophy of education are McEwan 2000 and Sung-Won Kim 2000.

[3] This sketch of cognitive stages of growth is largely focussed on the tradition 17-23 year old university student. Differences with older students (the “young at heart student”) may also be noted. Basically, I’ve noticed three types of reactions by the “young at heart” when faced with new cognitive modes of thought: (1) those who have already faced such moments in the past and, therefore, have dealt with such transitional angst; (2) those who are so set in their ways that they refuse to think in new or different ways, thereby negating the very learning process; and (3) those who are faced with cognitive dissonance and, generally, engage those moments as a challenge. Within many secular universities there has been an influx of such “young at heart” students within the classroom. I would be very interested in seeing what distinctive dynamic occurs within faith-oriented institutions – are there such students present in Nazarene institutions, do life setting or institutional structures affect their learning processes, how do they engage such pedagogical challenges?

[4] One of the most moving and thought-provoking works I’ve recently read on the importance of rites of passage within North American culture is Ron Grimes’s *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (2000). To recognize and mark as meaningful transitions those moments of change are necessary for a healthy self-identity to emerge. So also, I would contend, for those transitions in the learning process.

[5] On collaborative pedagogy see Campbell and Smith 1997; Anson, Cafarelli, Rutz, and Madison 1998; Desjardins 2001, 1998; Blevins 2001; Outcalt 2000; Tite 1999, 2002; and more recently Jarvis, Holford and Griffin 2003. Feminist contributions to such a pedagogical framework, especially on the importance of personal experience, see Jackson 1999 and Weiler 1988.

[6] This is true even when we share part of this process with our students, such as allowing them to have final say on the syllabus, encouraging them to offer course evaluations throughout the semester, or even bringing them into the construction and evaluation of assignments (e.g., I recently experimented with having my students prepare the essay questions for a mid-term exam in our Gnosticism course). The final decision is ours as instructors as to what degree of shared ownership we allow students to have in a course. The issue, therefore, is less that of whether we have power and more so whether or not we decide to utilize our authority for guiding students within the learning process.

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