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

Terry D. Fach
Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology,
Canadian Nazarene University College

I have been invited to respond to Philip Tite's discussion which argues "that faith crisis moments are valuable learning opportunities that we as teachers should nurture." Specifically, I've been asked to comment on the applicability of Tite's claims to confessional learning environments (private Christian liberal arts colleges for example). I also offer some critical reflections on how faith development and cognitive development may create inevitable crises. My response is based on my experience as a student and a teacher in both larger secular universities and also in a private Christian liberal arts college.

Do students in confessional settings experience faith crises as part of their critical cognitive growth? It is obvious to me and my colleagues that they do. In fact, I see no reason to think that students in secular universities who come from faith-based traditions are any different than students in confessional colleges or universities with respect to their cognitive development. The same experiences of "creative destruction" that initiate faith crises occur in *all* classrooms. I think Tite is correct in pointing out that these crisis moments are not limited to those with strong religious beliefs, especially in the secular university. Normative convictions of all kinds (about gay marriage legislation or the war in Iraq, for example) are fair game in the university environment and are inevitably brought under the scrutiny of free critical inquiry. Indeed, it is arguable that one of our goals for *all* students (particularly in the arts and humanities) is the fostering of environments of creative destruction so that students develop and grow towards "conjunctive modes of understanding." It seems obvious to me that other goals are desirable as well, and I shall turn to these below.

Tite also seems right in suggesting that certain topics are more likely than others to precipitate crises of faith, depending on the student and on the importance of the topic in that student's life. As a teacher of critical thinking (informal logic), I am fascinated by the following phenomenon. When a basic fallacy (e.g. fallacy of denying the antecedent) is defined and illustrated by a mundane example, most of my students (the large majority of which are Christian theists) quickly grasp the concept. However, if I switch my example to "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, then you will be saved; you do not confess Jesus as Lord; therefore you will not be saved" the response is noticeably different. That this argument's conclusion is invalid seems much less obvious given a variety of factors, including the way in which certain beliefs become embedded in one's belief network and the inscrutable reasoning patterns of the human mind. As Tite says, this phenomenon is not unique to the confessional setting. The same kind of cognitive dissonance takes place when the foundational beliefs of the student raised in a secular, non-theistic "faith" are challenged.

I think Tite's exploration of cognitive crisis in religious studies classes in the secular university can be helpful to those working in faith-oriented institutions. However, to fully appreciate the pedagogical significance of such crises requires some careful thinking about how our students are in fact developing, and about the ultimate goals of education in the faith-based setting. First, it is my contention (see Sawicki 1984) that the time-line for cognitive growth is far longer than many in the faith community realize. If a person does not cognitively mature until roughly age 30, and if cognitive stage development is closely related to faith, then we who teach in the faith-based institutions may need to be more realistic about the faith development of our students. Typically the church presses young people in their teens to make a "decision to follow Christ," be baptized, or acknowledge in some way that they have chosen adult faith for themselves (the so-called "age of accountability"). But is this realistic, especially given the fact that students, even in their early twenties, are often not emotionally, socially, or intellectually ready to make such a commitment? In many cases these same students have been encouraged and rewarded for their unequivocal belief commitments and then sent off to college where they soon find themselves living between "two distinct worlds." This surely explains why faith crises are to some degree inevitable. How many and to what degree is no doubt related to the way these students—many of whom are second or third-generation Christians—are shaped by the expectations of parents, pastors, and peers. Wouldn't it make more sense to think of conversion (especially for students who have

grown up in a faith-based environment) as a process which gets worked out within the normal routines and practices of church life, including the years of college education?

What does this mean for instructors in faith-based settings? One implication is that professors would acknowledge the inevitability of faith crisis moments, days, or weeks in their students. They would also prepare for them intentionally. I find Tite's model of the instructor as "co-learner" a wholly unsatisfactory model for the faith-based college or university. While Russell's pedagogical programme strikes me as no more unique than one of many modern proposals since Kant, this is not a viable option in the Christian academy (or so I would argue). The instructor is one who actually *professes*, i.e. has a commitment to something that is worth passing on. In the Christian university or college this means that learning takes place under the leadership of teachers who, without embarrassment or apology, take a partisan position. There is no space to argue the point here, but it is reasonable that the inspiration and guidance of students requires (and intellectual accountability permits) commitment to a particular point of view. This is certainly not a new idea— Origen, the great Christian teacher in Alexandria in the 3rd century, modeled the combination of piety and scholarship. While perhaps antithetical to modern liberalism, such an approach to teaching can foster true leadership in the lives of students who are navigating their way to an appropriation of mature adult faith (the goal of all Christian higher education).

What's Faith Got to Do With it?
A Response to Philip L. Tite,
Teaching with Faith Crisis
By Terry D. Fach
Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Theology,
Canadian Nazarene University College