



Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good is Bad

Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today

New learnings from the ECSI data

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0. Introduction

**St Augustine
of Hippo**

"If you comprehend, it is not God."
Sermon 15,16

"Our heart is restless until it rests in You."
Confessions, 1.1.1

"If you comprehend, it is not God" (Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 15,16*)

"Our heart is restless until it rests in You" (Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions, 1.1.1*)

In the past fifteen years, I've had the privilege to research extensively the identity of Catholic schools in Western Europe, in the United States, and especially also in Australia. Our ECSI research group has been gathering quantitative and qualitative data from over half a million subjects in more than 1500 Catholic educational institutions around the world.

Our main goal is not just to assess *Catholic* school identity, but especially also to *enhance* the mission of the Catholic school "as a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation".¹ We do this from within an explicit theological framework, namely the Catholic school as an *inclusive* educational community that *Recontextualises* the Catholic faith from a *Post-Critical Belief* stance in *Dialogue* with the current context.

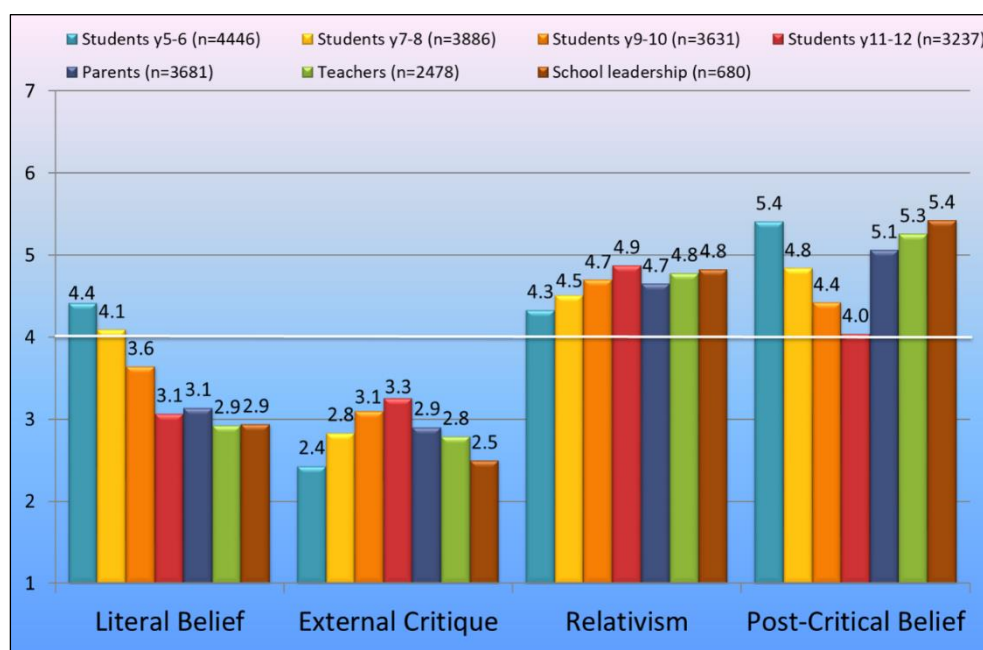
¹ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION (FOR SEMINARIES AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS), *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Vatican City: *Liberia Editrice Vaticana*, 1997), no.3.

In this presentation, we formulate one of the main challenges that we discover today in Catholic schools in Australia, and all over the world. We present our analysis of this challenge, and the perspective we see for strengthening Catholic education in its mission going forward.

This analysis is not limited to the sphere of education: it challenges the way the Catholic Church as such communicates itself in the contemporary world.

1. The Challenge: a strong disaffiliation of Church and Catholic faith

The vocation of Catholic schools is to offer a formation that invites students to develop a life-long and resilient faith inspired by the Catholic tradition and open to the world of today.

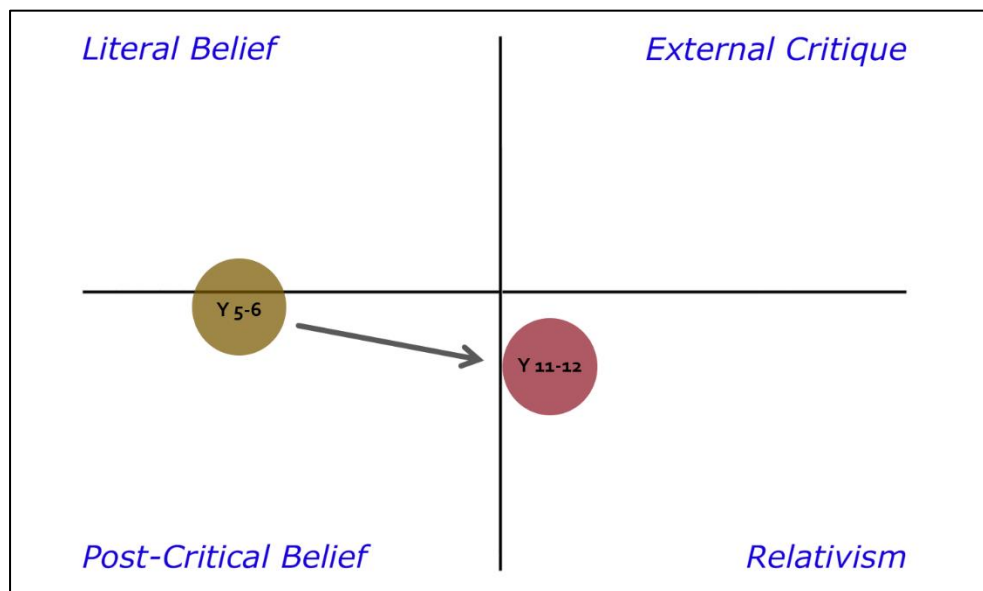


This graph shows the cognitive belief styles of more than 15,000 students and almost 7,000 adults in Catholic schools in one large diocese in Australia in the period between 2012-2019 (eight years).

If we isolate the results of the adult groups in this graph, we discover that their cognitive belief styles are close to the theological normative point or 'golden dot'. Parents, teachers, and school leadership promote a dominant *Post-Critical Belief* that is at the same time aware and appreciative of other beliefs and worldviews. From a theological-normative perspective, we could say that Catholic schools in this diocese are in good hands.

However, if we isolate the data of the students we see another pattern. Primary school children start with a remarkably firm *Literal Belief*, but as they grow older their approval of *Literal Belief* turns into rejection. They gradually align with the low level of *Literal Belief* present among adults. What is more striking, however, is the clear simultaneous rise of *Relativism* and *External Critique*, alongside a noteworthy drop-off in *Post-Critical Belief*. When we isolate the students in years 11-12 in secondary college, we see how *Relativism* has become the dominant way of dealing with belief at the expense of *Post-Critical Belief*.

So, Catholic education induces high levels of *Literal Belief* in children but does not facilitate a transformation from *Literal Belief* into *Post-Critical Belief* as the students grow older. Instead, Catholic schools are confronted with a steady increase of the two *unbelieving* cognitive styles, namely *Relativism* and even *External Critique*. When students leave the Catholic school system, they even start hesitating about *Post-Critical Belief*. Instead, they adopt the general cultural pattern of *Relativism* and *pluralism* present in their social environment, including a critical, dismissive undertone towards religion in the form of *External Critique*.

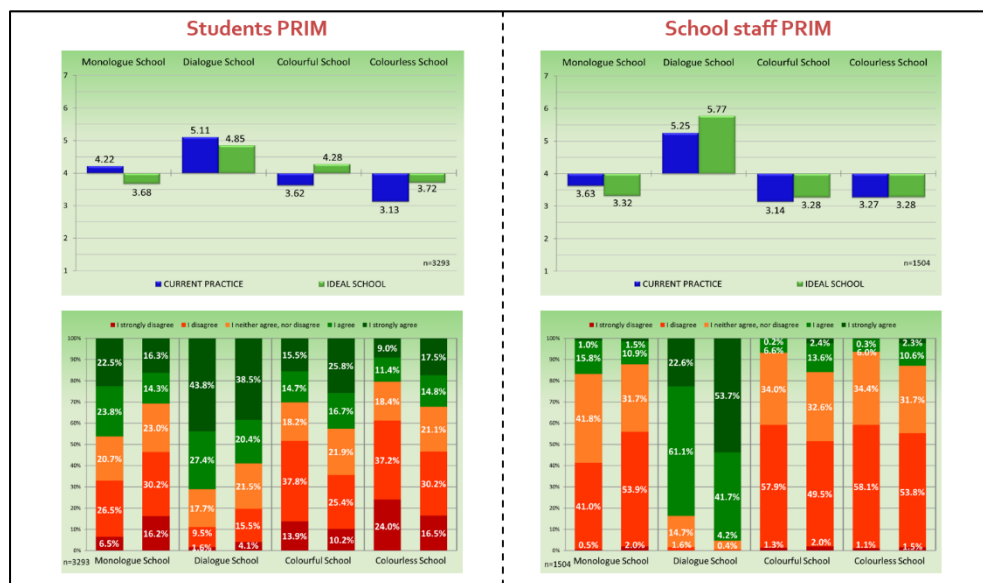


We summarize this drastic shift over twelve years of Catholic education in this Diagram. To be clear: this shift is not typical just for this particular diocese in Australia; we see such disaffiliation happening in all parts of the Western world, in different degrees and variations.

How do we explain that even after 12 years of Catholic religious education the Catholic faith seems to have lost so much of its plausibility and attractiveness for young people?

This question is pertinent especially since the youngest students in primary school seem to start off with such an ardent, eager and enthusiastic attitude. What can be done to halt and re-direct this massive shift from believing to unbelieving cognitive styles?

2. The analysis of the problem



What exactly is happening in Catholic primary schools?

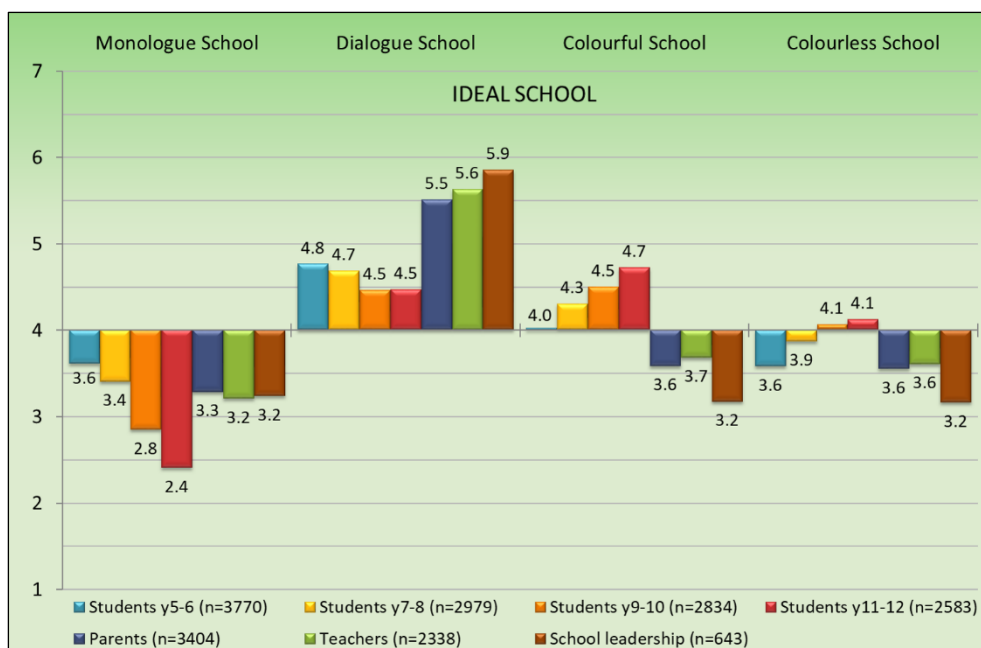
Firstly, if we look at the ECSI data on the factual level of the *Victoria Scale*, we see that primary school children as well as teachers and leaders perceive their school environment as having a combination of *Monological* and *Dialogical* tendencies.

Secondly, despite often significant diversity among student and staff populations in terms of *ethnicity and culture*, neither students nor staff in Catholic primary schools recognise the presence of significant *religious and philosophical diversity* present in the Catholic classroom. The reality of ethnic and cultural diversity has little impact on either the curriculum or the pedagogical approach in most Catholic schools today.

We describe Catholic schools that exhibit the above pattern as *Kerygmatic Dialogue Schools*.

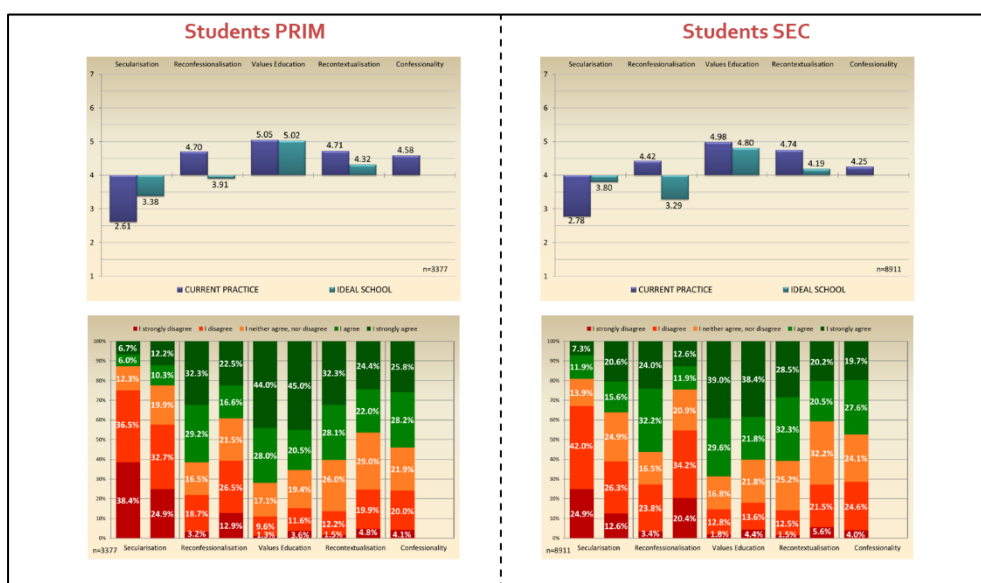
Dialogue is present here but it is used in the first place as a means to introduce and to proclaim the Catholic faith to a large number of students. This school type prefers that the dialogue is not 'disturbed' by too much diversity coming from the social context. Such schools can be described as 'Catholic safe havens' amid a complex plural environment. They offer children an ideal place to develop a basic trust and a strong personal *Catholic* identity.

The model of the *Kerygmatic Dialogue School* is predominant in Catholic education in Australia as well as many other places in the world.



This graph shows what happens when students progress from the primary to the secondary education level. The support for a *Monological* approach drops sharply. Where the older students are concerned, the secular *Colourful School* model takes over from both the *Monologue School* and even the *Dialogue School*, coinciding with similar increases in *Relativism* and *External Critique*.

The experience of the school as a 'Catholic safe haven' is *interrupted* when children leave the primary school and move into the very different environment of the secondary school. The impact of the kerygmatic religious education approach begins to dissipate like air from an artificially inflated balloon.



The *Melbourne Scale* reveals the mechanism that is used to create *Kerygmatic Dialogue Schools*.


Students in primary schools undergo considerable *Christian Values Education*, which is intended to (Re)Confessionalise the Catholic school and its members. The data indicate that educators make a very strong association between *the* human experience and *the* Catholic answer to it, to the extent that they are nearly indistinguishable. We have called this a 'mono-correlational' strategy. It assumes that

the goal of religious education is to expose the one-to-one association between the values, virtues, experiences and sensitivities of the students on the one hand, and the Catholic religious messages on the other. This approach tries to harmonise, synchronise and reconcile the two, often by mediating the Christian message through 'gospel values' that presumably are shared by everybody.


A kerygmatic type of *Dialogue School* that habitually employs *Christian Values Education* is a harmonious context with little 'disturbance' from the outside, secular, and plural world. There are few real challenges, difficult questions or unresolved issues. Everything *fits nicely* with everything else. Such a milieu easily produces *Literal Belief* in young children. Many primary school children feel safe in such an environment.

The challenge presented by empirical data

The story as revealed by the student data



- *Christian Values Education* turns out to be counterproductive: the intention and the actual effect of this strategy are opposite.
- The monological use of 'dialogue' is *interrupted* by other voices. The real world and real life experiences present complex challenges — that are not 'solvable' by a one-to-one correlation.
 - The result is not just the decline of *Literal Belief* but also of *Post-Critical Belief* and religious awareness in general.
 - Not just the *Monologue School*, but also *Dialogue School* is surpassed and gradually replaced by the *Colourful School*.
 - Not just *Reconfessionalisation* but also *Recontextualisation* is surpassed and gradually replaced by the desire to *Secularise*.
- Most secondary college students have come to reject all forms of religiosity, literal and symbolic alike, as they approach graduation.

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However, the link between values and faith is less strong than one might be inclined to believe. On the normative level, *Reconfessionalisation* drops and *Secularisation* grows. This trend already begins in the primary school and continues as the students progress into the secondary school level. For most students in secondary schools, *Christian Values Education* no longer leads to *Reconfessionalisation* but goes hand in hand with a diminishing resistance to *Secularisation*. *Christian Values Education* turns out to be counter-productive: the intention and the actual effect of this strategy are opposite.

The 'kerygmatic balloon' of the Catholic primary school gradually deflates, so to speak, in the course of secondary education. The *Monological* use of 'dialogue' is *interrupted* by other voices. When adolescents open up to the complexities of the world around them and accumulate real life experiences, the traditional and predictable mono-correlation of 'one' question with 'one' answer is broken.

- The result is not just the decline of *Literal Belief* but also of *Post-Critical Belief* and religious awareness in general.
- Not just the *Monologue School*, but also *Dialogue School* is surpassed and gradually replaced by the *Colourful School*.
- Not just *Reconfessionalisation* but also *Recontextualisation* is surpassed and gradually replaced by the desire to secularise the identity of the school.

As a result, most secondary college students have come to reject all forms of religiosity—literal and symbolic alike—as they approach graduation.

3. Positive theology and psychology

On several occasions we have had the privilege to visit Catholic schools in Australia. Invariably these are profound experiences. Teachers, principals and parents create such a warm, harmonious, and welcoming environment where children and teenagers can grow and learn to respect and love each other, their families, their neighbourhoods, their country, and the world that God created.

It is crucial that young people are given the opportunity to develop a sense of *basic trust*: trust in themselves, in the world and, of course, in the Catholic faith. 'Gospel values' contribute especially well to developing strong-rooted and morally inspired personalities.

The desire to 'make Jesus real' in an all-encompassing and nurturing pedagogical context is very strong.

Many educators intrinsically connect a 'positive theology' with an educational approach rooted in 'positive psychology' that stresses individual and communal well-being. It concerns a humanistic movement that puts emphasis on happiness, positivity, success, bliss, and human prosperity for every student. Many Catholic educators are enthusiastic about maximising the *eudaimonia* in an explicitly Catholic living and learning environment.

It may appear that those things that hold the greatest value in life, the factors that contribute to a well-lived, fulfilling and 'good life', go hand in hand or are even equated with the construction of a *Christian* way of life. Professionals in Catholic education, not only in Australia but all around the globe, are excited about 'positive psychology' as a kind of highway to 'positive theology'.

Kerygmatic Dialogue Schools create a safe, kind, happy, nurturing, open and generous community, with the expectation that this is the way in which 'Christ' becomes 'real' for all involved—regardless of who they are and what their background or worldview might be.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with fostering positive psychology in educational settings. It is commendable that schools—Catholic and otherwise—present themselves as positive educational environments that radiate safety, success and self-assurance. There are no issues with positive psychology as such, not even when it is correlated with positive theology.

BUT there lies a risk in swiftly and easily *harmonising* 'happiness' with a certain moral and spiritual understanding of Christianity. Issues arise when they appear so closely related that they are *identified*, as if they would be saying the same thing.


An exemplary case


Interview with year 6 students

Positive theology at work in a Catholic school


August 2019

Audio + transcript (3:24)





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During the 2019 Australian winter I visited a Catholic primary school and conducted a group interview with five students of 11-12 years old: Grace, Hannah, Erin, Nathan, and Joseph.

Media coverage of the tragic mass shooting in a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, US.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_El_Paso_shooting



It was on the 5th of August 2019, the morning in which the world media reported about a mass shooting incident in El Paso, Texas, USA that left twenty people dead.

Let's listen to an excerpt of our conversation, while you can read the transcript on the slide.
(3:24 minutes)

Question by moderator: "What did you learn about yourselves as a school community from the survey?"
 Student: "I just learnt that we're really connected to God and we all enjoy praying and spending time with God."
 Moderator: "Okay."

Question by moderator: "What do you like about being at this Catholic school?"
 Student: "I think everyone is just really nice to each other. We have our five values, and everybody accepts each other and helps everyone."

Student: "We do prayer every morning, and we go to Mass, and I just like enjoy it."

Question by moderator: "What do you like about prayer?"

Student: "We create our own prayers.

So, we get into groups once a term and we put together our own prayer for the week."

Student: "So, if there's any problems you might be feeling,
or if you might be feeling a bit closed-off from other people,

it's really nice to get it out through prayer.

It's a really good way to socialise with people as well."

Question by Didier: "Do you also know about the difficult things about religion?

For example: if people suffer, if people are dying—then how can God be good, and so?"

Students: "When we were young at this school, we wouldn't learn about that,
but as we got older, like last year..."

Didier: "Can anyone give an example?"

Student: "We learned about how Jesus *died* for us on the cross.

And how He died to save all of us from... ehh... our sins."

Student interrupts: "The brutal things he went through, like whipping that he had to go through..."

Student: "Yeah, and the crown of thorns. Hmm."

Moderator: "But what about when you hear about the horrible things that happen to people?"

Students in unison: "Yeah."

Moderator: "And you think, how does God let that happen to them?

I mean I think you would know that there were shootings in America yesterday?"

Student: "Yeah, exactly, like 20 or more people..."

Moderator: "Do you have conversations about that?"

Student: "Not really. Sometimes we do. We try to keep ... positive, do you know what I mean?

Instead of focusing on the negative things, we try to think about what God *does* for them."

Student: "And how can we *stop* the negative things?"

Student: "I also think it's because our teachers don't really ... want to put it in our minds.

But not only that, but we don't actually know the *full* story behind it.

Because, well, we're in Australia, and they're in America.

So, if our teachers don't really know the full story

they don't really ... want to talk about it."

Girl: "I think it's quite hard for ... for always to be positive.

There's always gonna be some negative things in the world.

And we kind of just need to focus on what God *IS* doing for us.

Like if you look at us in Australia, we are really lucky with no shootings at all most of the time.

So, we try to focus on the things that God *DOES* give us,

instead of the things He might let slip sometimes."

Didier: "And what do you say about it?"

Other student: "You have to sort of accept it, like it's something that's gonna happen."

Student: "That God always has a plan to ... well, He did this for a reason."

Didier: "So you don't think that God is angry when He sees this happening?

You think He likes it? Because it is necessary? I don't know, I'm just asking the question."

Student: "Ehh... I've never really thought of ... God punishing us."

Student: "If people are really sorry, like genuinely sorry, then He would forgive them."

Moderator: "Hmm."

Similar student interviews could be conducted in any Catholic school in Australia and elsewhere in the world. It illustrates all aspects of our analysis of the Catholic primary school pedagogy today, that is also confirmed in the ECSI research data.

Interview with year 6 students

Analysis. Positive theology at work in a Catholic school



- The school is a 'safe haven', based on *Christian Values Education*, unambiguously correlated with God.
- The problem of evil is met by *positive psychology*, hand in hand with *positive theology*.
- For these students, it is nearly impossible to associate God with anything *negative*. Every time an *interruption* is introduced, students attempt to reconcile and harmonise. Negativity is immediately covered over by the idea of a loving, just, forgiving God who is present and accessible.
- *Mono-correlation in action*: (positive) human experience and (positive) divine experience are connected to a literal understanding of how God deals with evil in the world.

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The school is a 'safe haven' ("they are in America, we are in Australia"; "we are lucky with no shootings") based on *Christian Values Education* ("we are nice and open to each other", "we socialise with people") and clearly correlated with God ("we are really connected with God", "we like spending time with God"). And when confronted with evil—after some hesitation—the students choose to espouse positive psychology ("we try to keep positive"; "teachers don't put it in our minds") and positive theology ("we need to focus on what God is doing for us"). In the students' perception, *positive psychology* and *positive theology* go hand in hand. Evil itself is something that God allows ("something He might let slip sometimes"), arranges ("God has a plan"), even as some form of divine retribution ("God punishing us"). For these young students, it is almost unimaginable that God is angry or turns people away. When God has a purported right to be angry, this anger is ameliorated, immediately covered over by the idea of a forgiving God—at least for the person who genuinely repents, that is, for Catholics.

So these young students are very well trained in the framing behaviours of *positive psychology* and *positive theology*, which are made to mirror each other like identical twins. Each time the interviewer tries to introduce 'interruptions' in the harmonious representation of school life, the students try to adjust, reconcile or remove them—even at the cost of a loving God.

Interview with year 6 students

Long-term effects of positive theology aligned with positive psychology



- It is this mono-correlation that will ultimately be rejected by older students, as they increasingly discover that it is *culturally and theologically implausible*.
- The reality of life (let's face it): complexity, multiplicity, ambiguity, difficulties, suffering. When religious faith is reduced to something 'naïve' and 'sweet' for children, it can *no longer be a relevant dialogue partner* as students grow up.
- As they grow older, students no longer need a *religious* framework in order to live a good life. They leave their faith behind in (primary) school.
- We are mistaken to presuppose that creating solid basic trust in young people using positive psychology, 'gospel values' and uplifting Christian virtues would *automatically* lead to the creation of convinced, robust and resilient adult Catholic believers in the long term.
- *The alignment between positive psychology and faith appears counterproductive*.

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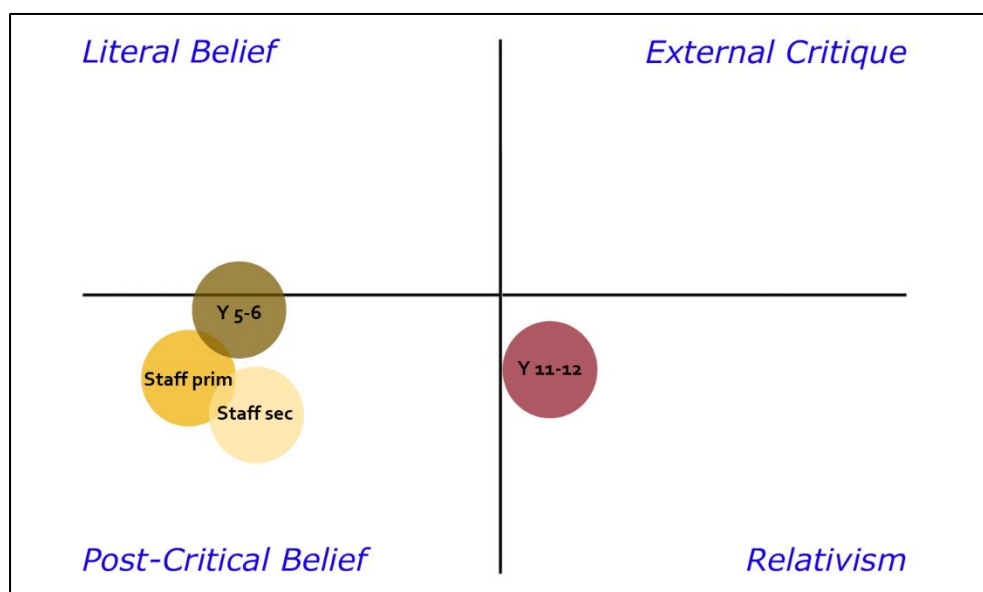
Here we come across an **example of mono-correlation** between (positive) human experience and (positive) divine presence, connected to a literal understanding of how God deals with evil in the world. It is this mono-correlation that will ultimately be rejected by older students, as they increasingly discover that it is **culturally and theologically implausible**.

When the 'balloon' deflates and **the reality of life** pours in, with all its complexity, multiplicity, ambiguity, difficulties, suffering and pain, it is as if the Catholic faith no longer can be a relevant dialogue partner. Religious faith is something naive and sweet for children.

Faith is like a 'launching platform' for life, but once the rocket has left, the platform is no longer needed. As they grow older, students **no longer need the religious framework in order to live a good life**. They graduate as well-educated, responsible and reliable citizens, but they have left their faith behind in (primary) school.

We are mistaken to presuppose that creating solid basic trust in young people using positive psychology, 'gospel values' and uplifting Christian virtues would *automatically* lead to the creation of convinced, robust and resilient adult Catholic believers in the long term. As the ECSI data shows, **this alignment between positive psychology and faith appears even counterproductive**.

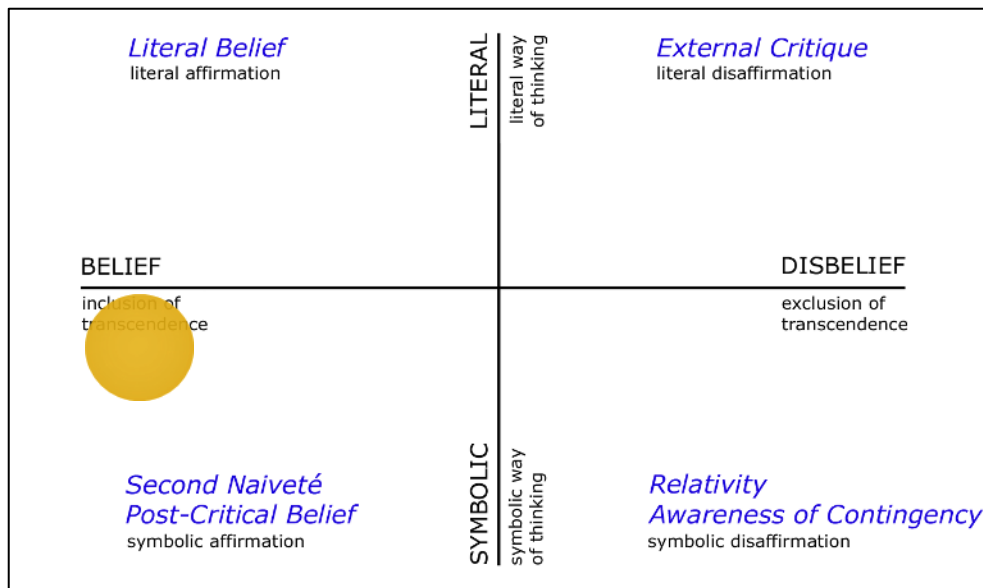
How to circumvent this process, and how to generate theologically and pedagogically productive ways of *preventing* the outmoding of religious faith as students grow older?



On this diagram of the *PCB Scale*, we pinpoint the profile of students and staff in primary and secondary schools.

According to the ECSI data, many students in primary schools cross the line into *Literal Belief*. In the course of secondary education, however, **this position drastically shifts**: older students leave *Literal Belief* behind and transition fully into the quadrant of *Relativism*.


Meanwhile, the teachers remain close to the 'golden dot' or normative point of ECSI, especially in primary schools. Comparatively, the secondary teachers move more in the direction of *Relativism*, a trend which is then magnified in the secondary students as well.



It is important to emphasise the reason for the exact position of the 'golden dot' on the *PCB Scale* diagram. The 'golden dot' represents the ideal belief stance on theological grounds. It is essential to understand why the golden dot deliberately does not touch the line that separates *Literal* from *Post-Critical Belief*.


Position of the 'golden dot' on the *PCB Scale* diagram

Why the golden dot deliberately does not touch the dividing line with *Literal Belief*




BELIEF

inclusion of transcendence



- The narrow **gap** is extremely significant: it shows that PCB always accepts the need for symbolic mediations to relate to God.
- No human being has ever seen God. Our human condition imposes restrictions on the scope of 'positive theology'.
- It implies a movement away from a *correlational* approach that attempts to capture God, towards an approach that seeks God more in the *interruption* of the existing order.
- → Our hypothesis is that Catholic schools in Australia are being based too strongly in positive theology. They need to compensate by integrating alternative theological views!

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This denotes that *Post-Critical Belief* always accepts the need for symbolic mediations to relate to the Divine Reality. Our human condition imposes restrictions on the scope of 'positive theology'. No human being has ever seen God. We may desire to be with God, connected as closely as possible. Still, God always resists our 'frame'; God escapes our attempts to 'capture' Godself.

Although the little gap between the dot and the dividing line is narrow, it is extremely significant. From a pedagogical perspective, it implies a movement away from a *correlational* approach that attempts to capture God, towards an approach that seeks God more in the *interruption* of the existing order. It implies a movement away from a God who is immediately present and real, towards a God who reveals Godself ultimately in God's own hiddenness and through our searching for Godself time and again.

Our hypothesis is that Catholic schools in Australia are being based too strongly in positive theology.

In order to prepare students better to become strong and resilient believers in the secular and diverse society of the future, Catholic schools need to compensate by integrating alternative theological views.

4. Positive theology and theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary

- Distinction: positive (or *kataphatic*) and negative (or *apophatic*) theological traditions.
→ "theologies of vulnerability and responsibility"
- Catholic schools in Australia, primary as well as secondary, are invited to complement their habitual focus on positive theology with deliberate attempts at introducing more 'theologies of vulnerability and responsibility'.





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Systematic theologians throughout the centuries have made the important distinction between 'positive' (or kataphatic) and 'negative' (or apophatic) theological traditions.² We refer to the latter as 'theologies of vulnerability and responsibility'.

Our suggestion is that Catholic schools in Australia, primary as well as secondary, should complement their habitual unilateral focus on positive theology with deliberate attempts at introducing more 'theologies of vulnerability and responsibility'.

Positive theology considers God as certain, predictable, and knowable through the human experience, whereas theologies of vulnerability and responsibility consider God in terms of Otherness and even of Hiddenness and Absence.

Positive theology confidently approaches the human experience as one in which God is *mediated*, an experience to which people can positively connect and identify. The normative point in the *PCB Scale* as positioned in the diagram bears witness to this possibility. We are compelled to try to connect to God and believe we actually succeed in doing so through glimpses of the Divine nature that is revealed in our human experiences, and given shape by the Catholic faith tradition. Our human experiences invite us into a strong and vivid *covenantal connection* with the Divine Reality. Positive theologians assume they can actually point out how God is present and active in our lives.

It is of this positive experience that the students in the interview witness.

The 'golden dot' deliberately does not touch the dividing line with *Literal Belief* because, despite our desire to get as close to God as possible, our experiences nonetheless always fall short of actually grasping the Divine. The kind of positive theology that refutes this limitation and assumes that 'true believers' actually have (or receive) this capacity breaks through the dividing line and ends up in *Literal Belief*.


Theologians who stress the importance of vulnerability and responsibility, however, do not focus so much on getting closer to the 'real' encounter with God. They stress that God remains hidden from

² See: L. BOEVE, *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York, Continuum, 2007.

direct human experience. Human beings can only meet the Other through their encounter with the human other (responsibility), or by being confronted with the 'un-experience' of God (vulnerability). In a theology of responsibility, God reveals Godself as *the Other in the other*. God comes from elsewhere and *interrupts* our human existence.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas

- Levinas speaks about a God who reveals Godself in the face of the vulnerable other, in the 'Otherness of the other', in the specificity and vulnerability of the other as a human person.
- *"If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other."*




The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks about a God who reveals Godself in the face of the vulnerable other³. He refers to the Otherness of the other, the specificity and vulnerability of the other as a human person.

- The other is the child who can't go to school,
- the parent who can't pay the school bills,
- the family who loses a loved one,
- the grandparent who stumbles at the school gate,
- the recently immigrated Muslim parent who has not yet mastered the English language,
- the fellow staff member who suffers from burnout, et cetera.

Theologies of responsibility

Being *interrupted* requires a response





Prophetic traditions in the Bible: prophets are 'called' by God, often against their own natural inclinations, personality or aspirations. They even dare to question God 'in God's name'.

- Encountering the Divine in the Otherness of the other is not always pleasant and positive.
- The experience of 'alterity' or 'heteronomy' can turn our whole life upside down.
- It demands a response in the form of 'responsibility'
- Students can be especially open to the idea of a God who *interrupts* the status quo and demands truth, justice and reconciliation!

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³ D. POLLEFEYT, *To Love the Torah More Than God. Emmanuel Levinas' Jewish Thought*, in ID., *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust*, Leuven, Peeters, 2018, chapter 4, p. 109-126.

Such an encounter with the Divine in the Otherness of the other is not always pleasant and positive. On the contrary, this Divine encounter can turn our whole life upside down, demanding a response in the form of 'responsibility'. The experience of 'alterity' or 'heteronomy' questions the orientation of my life towards 'me', 'myself' and 'my religion'. This experience compels me 'in God's name' to take up responsibility for the whole world.


In his newest book, the Leuven theologian Roger Burggraeve claims it is 'time for another God'⁴.

Young people in secondary schools can be especially open to the idea of a God who interrupts the status quo and demands truth, justice and reconciliation. This becomes clear in their concern for poverty and social inequality, their protest against racism and discrimination, their commitment to combating climate change and safeguarding the future of the planet.

With regard to a theology of responsibility, we can refer to the prophetic traditions in the Bible. Prophets are 'called' by God, often against their own natural inclinations, personality or aspirations. They are not afraid to stand up, even against ruling powers or religious systems. They even dare to question God 'in God's name', if necessary.


Theologies of vulnerability

Being interrupted makes us feel vulnerable and longing



- Negative moments are part of life: doubt, fear, frustration, loneliness, despair.
- People feel an astringent desire for fullness of life and divine redemption — but they just cannot see or experience it.
- Hester panim* ('hiding face'): God has been 'eclipsed'.
- But also here — especially here — the Catholic faith tradition has much to offer!
- Young people are not spared these experiences (nor should they be).

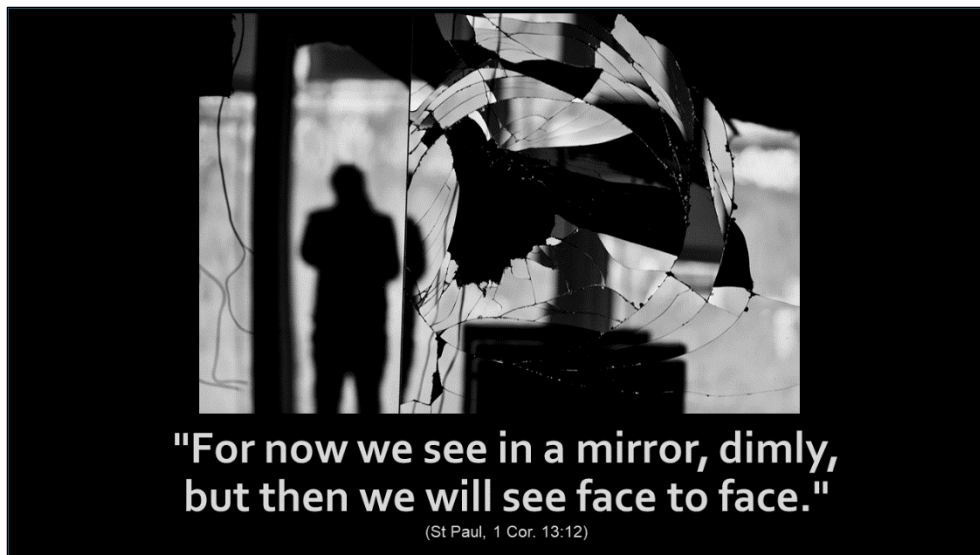
In a theology of vulnerability, religion is not put aside or rejected when times are dark. Instead, religious language is used to express negative experiences.

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A theology of responsibility is closely related to a theology of vulnerability. They both refer to religious experiences where people start looking for God in times and places where things seem desperate and 'godforsaken'. Alas, there are many instances where people are lonely, disappointed, frustrated, suffering, enduring hardship, filled with doubt, stripped of hope, or confronted with death. In these negative moments, people feel an astringent desire for fullness of life and divine redemption—but they just cannot see or experience it. It is as if, in that crucial moment in their lives, God has been 'eclipsed'. No doubt, even young people are not spared these experiences, such as when they are confronted with the divorce of their parents, the death of a beloved grandparent, chronic illness or the rampant destruction when bushfires burn out of control.

But also here—especially here—the Catholic faith tradition has so much to offer.

⁴ R. BURGGRAEVE, *Hoog tijd voor een andere God. Bijbels diepgronden naar de ziel van ons mens-zijn*, Leuven, Davidfonds, 2015.



Medieval Christian mystics, for example, offer strong testimony regarding the search for God in the 'dark night'. They endured loss, both in their sense of self as well as in their very ability to express it, instead substituting that loss for mere metaphors, such as of desire, of pain and of darkness. Their religious language, stories, rituals, and symbols express a God of *Otherness* and give rise to liminal experiences of not-knowing, interruption, and paradoxes. Negative experiences happen unexpectedly, disturb existing narratives, human constructions, and presumed certainties. In religious language and symbolism, instead of revealing Godself, God rather hides Godself from us. God seems to escape any attempt at definition through words, references and symbols.

In a theology of vulnerability, religion is not put aside or rejected when times are dark. On the contrary, religious language is used to express negative experiences.

In the Bible and especially in the psalms we find countless expressions of the theology of vulnerability. Many other examples can be given: the prohibition to make images of God (Exodus 4:6); the grieving of the prophets about the destruction of Jerusalem (Book of Lamentations); Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43-44); Christ on the cross crying out to God (Matthew 27:46); or Paul's statement that "for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary



Positive theology	Theologies of vulnerability and responsibility
God can be 'captured' in correlations between the human experience and the Divine.	God always withdraws from our correlations. Precisely through these 'un-experiences' God reveals Godself to us as Someone who is 'other' and 'greater' than our human experiences.
God is experienced as intimacy and connectedness, in a natural way continuously present and active in life.	The Transcendent is apprehended as 'beyond knowing'. God is a supernatural Mystery and absolute Other who only reveals Godself unexpectedly as an <i>interruption</i> .
God is encountered in a continual experience of meaning over time.	God is somehow 'experienced' and 'related to' in silence and loneliness, in doubt and not-knowing, in tragedy and natural or human catastrophes, in resistance against evil and the struggle to obtain justice, in martyrdom, conflict and war.

Positive theology believes that God can be 'captured' in correlations between the human experience and the Divine.

According to theologies of vulnerability and responsibility, however, God always withdraws from our correlations that are inevitably too simple, superficial and inadequate. Precisely through these 'un-experiences' God reveals Godself to us as Someone who is 'other' and 'greater' than our human experiences.

In positive theology, God is experienced as intimacy and connectedness, in a natural way continuously present and active in life, due to the mediation of signs, symbols, and relationships.

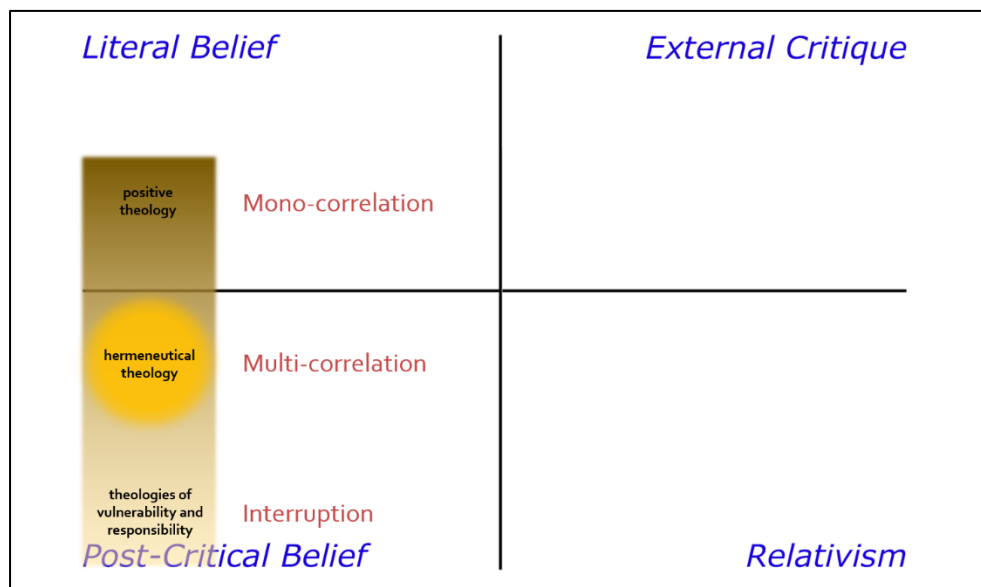
In theologies of vulnerability and responsibility, however, the Transcendent is apprehended as beyond knowing, even in our signs, symbols and relationships. God is a supernatural Mystery and absolute Other who only reveals Godself unexpectedly as a call for change, as an *interruption*, as emptiness or loss, or sometimes as darkness or confusion.

In positive theology, God is encountered in a continual experience of meaning over time.

In theologies of vulnerability and responsibility, however, God always surprises us in unpredictable, profound and ecstatic events that are beyond human understanding. God is somehow 'experienced' and 'related to' in silence and loneliness, in doubt and not-knowing, in tragedy and natural or human catastrophes, in resistance against evil and the struggle to obtain justice, in martyrdom, conflict and war.

In Catholic thought, positive theology and theologies of responsibility and vulnerability are **not mutually exclusive**. Countless examples can be given of how the Catholic faith tradition acknowledges *both* dimensions. They articulate different dimensions of religious experience. We encounter both tendencies in different moments of religious life. Both theologies can in fact operate as mutual correctives to each other, while there also always remains a tension between them.

Let us apply this distinction to religious education and Catholic school identity.



In religious education and Catholic school identity there cannot be a preference for either positive theology or theologies of vulnerability and responsibility. It is not a question of either/or. Instead, This diagram indicates that there is a **continuum** between positive theology and theologies of vulnerability and responsibility, that exist in productive tension with one another.

We suggest that this worthwhile and fertile tension is an invitation for leaders, teachers and students in primary and secondary Catholic schools to engage with positive theology as well as theologies of vulnerability and responsibility.

In Catholic schools today, we need more 'Good Friday' and less 'Easter'. Where the Kingdom of God is concerned, we need to stress the 'not yet' rather than claiming too quickly the 'already'. The challenge for Catholic schools today is not God's absence *per se*, nor the negation of God as 'Emmanuel' — which means: 'God among us', correlated, incarnated. Rather, the challenge remains the ease, the superficiality and even the falsity with which people claim, in the face of God's absence, to have identified Emmanuel.

We'd like to encourage all Catholic schools in Australia to move away from their one-sided focus on positive theology linked to positive psychology, and to purposefully invite people to stand in the tension with theologies of vulnerability and responsibility.

We hypothesize that this will transform students into steadfast believers who will not so easily ignore or reject their *Post-Critical* religious belief at those perilous times when *Literal Belief* fails and convenient mono-correlations break their promise. We expect that the Catholic faith tradition will remain a dialogue partner for them for life, even when life reveals itself as more complex, vulnerable, mysterious, painful and less 'happy'.

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary

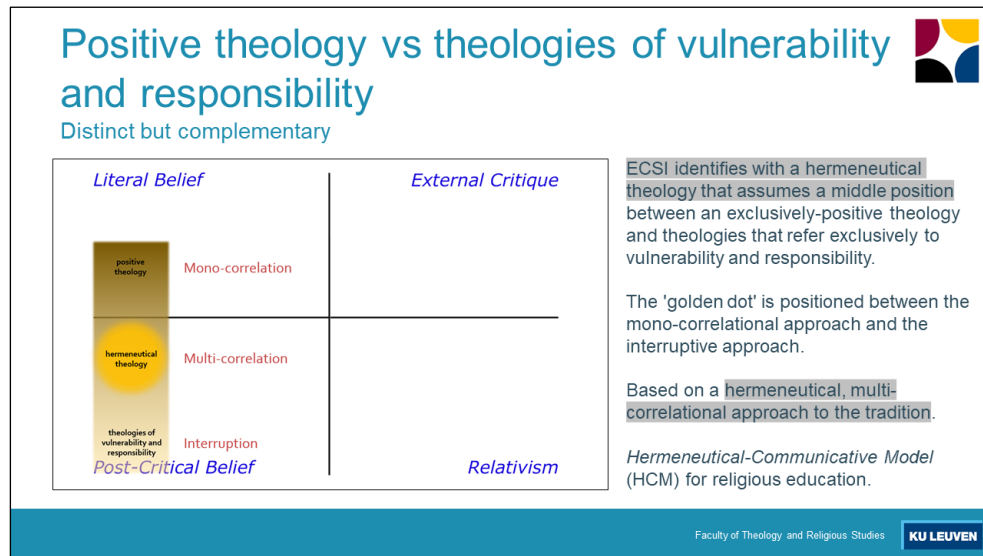
From a belief based solely on answers and certainty ...	to a belief that can also deal with questions and the search for truth.
From a belief based only on knowing ...	to a belief that can also embrace not-knowing and open-endedness.
From only finding answers and solutions in faith ...	to also probing the mysteries of life with the Bible as a guide.
From only experiencing 'happiness' in religious belief ...	to learning also to deal religiously with imperfection and pain.
From a presumed harmonious religious life ...	to an existence marked by ambiguities, paradoxes, and new vocations.
From using the Catholic faith as the endpoint of a puzzle that has finally all come together ...	to a perspective that holds the Christian narrative open and alive within the nuances, heartaches and challenges of daily life.

In Catholic schools today, we need more 'Good Friday' and less 'Easter'.
Regarding the *Kingdom of God*: we need to stress the 'not yet' rather than claiming too quickly the 'already'.

→ We hypothesize that this will transform students into steadfast believers who will not so easily ignore or reject their *Post-Critical* religious belief. We expect that the Catholic faith tradition will remain a dialogue partner for life.

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- The proposed transition implies a shift from a belief based solely on answers and certainty, to a belief that can also deal with questions and the search for truth.
- It implies a shift from a belief based only on knowing, to a belief that can also embrace not-knowing and open-endedness.
- It is a shift from only finding answers and solutions in faith, to also probing the mysteries of life with the Bible as a guide.
- It is a shift from only experiencing 'happiness' in religious belief, to learning also to deal religiously with imperfection and pain.
- It is a shift from a presumed harmonious religious life, to an existence marked by ambiguities, paradoxes, and new vocations.
- It is a shift from using the Catholic faith as the endpoint of a puzzle that has finally all come together, to a perspective that holds the Christian narrative open and alive within the nuances, heartaches and challenges of daily life.



We identify with a hermeneutical theology that assumes a middle position between an exclusively-positive theology on the one hand and theologies that refer exclusively to vulnerability and responsibility on the other.

The 'golden dot' is positioned between a mono-correlational approach—one that 'has all the answers'— and one that stresses God's radically unknowable, interruptive hiddenness—one that 'suspends all the answers'.

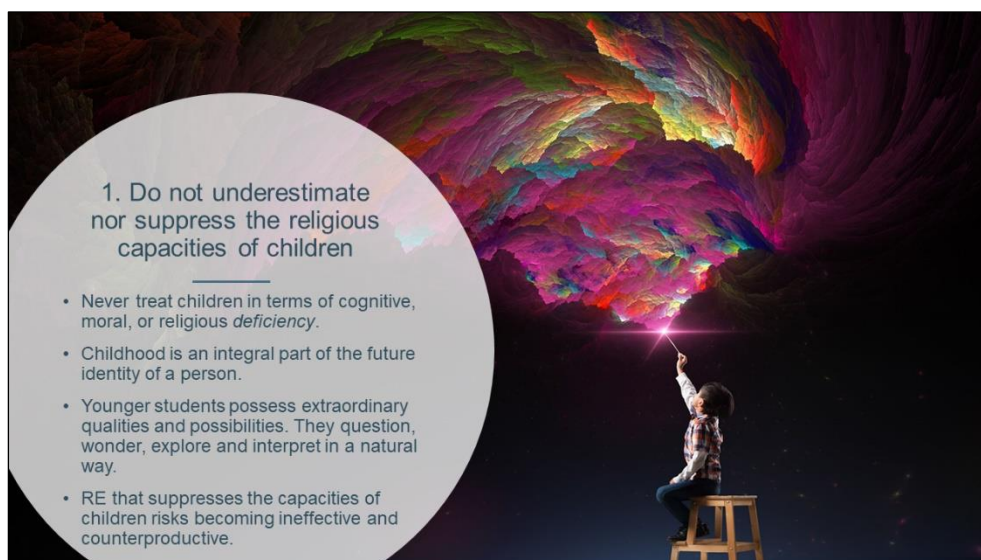
ECSI's normative position is the *hermeneutical* middle ground, below the dividing line that distinguishes symbolic from *Literal Belief*, based on a rich *multi-correlational approach* to the tradition. From this position one can formulate faith-filled answers to very human questions, while at the same time maintaining the awareness that there are many aspects, perspectives and possibilities not included in my answer—each of which in turn could be enriched *and* challenged by other viewpoints.

The *Hermeneutical-Communicative Model (HCM)* is a pedagogical approach for religious education in the classroom that provides students with the attitudes and skills needed to deal with such complex multi-correlation.

5. Fourteen concrete proposals

We would like to present fourteen concrete proposals to realise this challenging shift. These recommendations are intended first and foremost for Catholic schools, primary and secondary. However, they also apply to the Catholic Church as a whole and to the way it manifests itself in other sectors worldwide.

1. Do not underestimate nor suppress the religious capacities of children




It is crucial **never to treat children in terms of cognitive, moral, or religious deficiency**. This applies especially to the field of religious education. Do not consider children to be 'not yet' adults.

Instead, they are unique beings with their own special characteristics, possibilities and strengths. Childhood is not a deficient stage that should be overcome. Instead, it ought to be viewed as an integral part of the future identity of a person. This presupposes that adults believe in the extraordinary qualities and possibilities that children possess. Younger students are capable of much more than they are often given credit for. They can question, wonder, explore and interpret, sometimes in a much more natural way than those who are older and supposedly 'wiser'.

Religious education that suppresses the capacities of children risks becoming ineffective and counterproductive, in particular when the students experience more freedom, flexibility and creativity in other school subjects.

2. Contact and exchange between leaders and staff of primary and secondary schools

2. Contact and exchange between leaders and staff of primary and secondary schools




- Primary and secondary schools should be aware of each other's approach with regard to religious education, and coordinate their efforts to guide the faith journeys of the students.
- Common analysis & collaborative approach
- Knowing the faith journeys of the students and understanding the actual effect on the longer term of the religious pedagogy used at school could be a crucial learning experience for every school leader and teacher.

It is important that primary school leaders and staff follow-up with 'their' children as they transit to secondary school and carry on their educational careers. Likewise, it would be helpful for secondary school leaders and staff to be aware of the religious background and history of the teenagers they enrol.

That way, primary and secondary schools coordinate their efforts to guide the faith journeys of the students who are entrusted to their care. A common analysis and a collaborative approach would be most helpful, especially when primary and secondary schools often tend to be distinct entities that operate in different ways.

In every preteen, teenager and adult, the child and the way he or she was introduced into the faith is still present—even if faith is minimised or denied later in life ("I no longer believe in this or that"). Knowing the faith journeys of the students and understanding the actual effect on the longer term of the religious pedagogy used at school could be a crucial learning experience for every school leader and teacher.

3. Reduce the impact of the transition from primary to secondary school



3. Reduce the impact of the transition from primary to secondary school

- Primary and secondary schools are distinct entities that operate in different ways. Transitioning from the one to the other is a profound experience, from a developmental and a religious perspective.
- Concerning faith formation, the gap between primary and secondary schools is disruptive for many students. A common approach could help bridge the gap.
- Create a common approach for children in years 5-6 (the final years of primary school) and teenagers in years 7-8 (the beginning of secondary school).

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A specific task is to create a common approach for children in years 5 and 6 (the final years of primary school) and teenagers in years 7 and 8 (the beginning of secondary school). This is an important period of transition, from both a developmental and a religious perspective. A common approach for these age groups could help bridge the gap between primary and secondary schools concerning faith formation.

4. Socially imposed positive theology: recognise its signs and attitudes

4. Socially imposed positive theology: recognise its signs and attitudes

- Students are well-accustomed to positive psychology and positive theology, and the strong bond between them.
- Students have been tutored and 'trained' to speak the religious language that is expected. They conform to the religious behaviour that is taught by example.
- But where is the line between initiation and indoctrination?
 - How does your school respect personal freedom of conscience and expression?
 - How does your school tolerate and invite creative thinking and critical questions?
 - How open is your school to a diversity of responses and expressions?



Our research and school visits make clear how well-accustomed students are to positive psychology and positive theology and the strong bond between them. Students have been tutored and 'trained' to speak the religious language that is expected, and they conform to the religious behaviour that is taught by example. One can observe this when they are singing religious songs, reciting prayers, preparing for Mass, et cetera.


As such, this is a positive fact: no-one is born a Catholic, but one becomes a Catholic only through initiation. However, there is a thin line between initiation and *indoctrination*. Here are some criteria to distinguish between the two.

- To what degree is there respect for personal freedom of conscience and expression?
- To what degree does a school tolerate and invite creative thinking and critical questions?
- To what degree is there an openness for a diversity of responses and expressions?

5. Protect the religious and spiritual integrity of every single student

5. Protect the religious and spiritual integrity of every single student

- The importance of protecting the integrity of the human person, and of the vulnerable child in particular..
- ..is why schools put a lot of effort into protecting the physical and psychological safety and well-being of all the students.
- But what about the spiritual integrity of children? Why is the concern for the specific sensitivities, vulnerabilities and requirements of individual students often not extended to the realm of religion, spirituality, ethics and life views?
- Become aware of the diversity in this area, and consciously differentiate between the students in religious education.



Catholic schools today, especially those in Australia, are extremely conscious of protecting the integrity of the human person, and of the vulnerable child in particular. Schools put a lot of effort into protecting the physical and psychological safety and well-being of all the students, and this is very justified indeed. For example, most schools would possess a list of allergies and dietary requirements at the level of the individual student.

It is important to be aware that this concern also applies to the spiritual vulnerability of children. In *Kerygmatic Dialogue Schools* we often observe how students are exposed to and expected to conform to a 'Catholic' perspective that is not genuinely their own. We are surprised that the concern for the specific sensitivities, vulnerabilities and requirements of individual students is not extended to the realm of religion, spirituality, ethics and life views. Instead, it often happens that in RE all the students are 'fed the same diet', regardless of their backgrounds, tastes or allergies. We suggest that you become aware of the diversity, and consciously differentiate between the students in religious education.

For sure, in the coming decades, this concern will become an increasingly important topic in our pluralising and globalising world. The impact of 'no religion' and *External Critique* will grow considerably, and will increasingly question the legitimacy of religion-based education from the perspective of individual freedom and autonomy. We need to be prepared for this.

6. Avoid teaching students religious insights that you do not believe yourselves

6. Avoid teaching students religious insights that you do not believe yourselves

- Never teach something that you do not understand, that you disapprove of, or that lacks plausibility for you as an educator.
- Teachers whose personal *PCB Belief* is poorly developed or who are not themselves religious, opt for the 'safest' option of introducing *Literal Belief* in students. They simply apply the 'mechanics' of mono-correlational *Christian Values Education*.
- Often, *Literal Belief* is installed in young people that is not only misguided and unnecessary, but also counterproductive in the longer term.



Here is an obvious but critical rule in religious education: never teach something to students that you do not believe yourself. Never teach something that you do not understand, that you disapprove of, or that lacks plausibility for you as an educator, wherever you stand.

In religious education classes, too many things are taught that need to be 'un-taught' later. Too much effort is required in adult catechesis to undo the unfortunate views and perspectives that people were presented literally when they were younger.


All too often it happens that teachers, whose personal *Post-Critical Belief* is poorly developed or who are not themselves religious, feel 'unsafe' when asked to teach Catholic religious education. Contrary to their own beliefs, even *Relativistic* and non-believing classroom teachers will opt for the 'safest' option of introducing *Literal Belief* in students. They simply apply the 'mechanics' of mono-correlational *Christian Values Education*, embedded in the comfortable framework of positive psychology. In this way, the teachers do not need to risk investing their own personality, spirituality and vulnerability in the teaching process.

By teaching things they do not believe themselves—often encouraged by an RE curriculum with a *Reconfessionalising* scope—the teachers install *Literal Belief* in young people that is not only misguided and unnecessary, but also counterproductive in the longer term.

7. Learning to 'do theology' with children, and among school staff

7. 'Do theology' with children, and among school staff

- The voices of children are authentic sources for theology. How children believe in God is as authentic as how adults believe.
- Make space in RE for children to ask their direct and 'naïve' questions, to make 'funny' arguments, to pray in overly 'pious' ways and to come up with 'strange' insights.
- In allowing children to ask theological questions, we allow them to prepare themselves to become resilient believers in the future.



In our book, *Children's Voices. Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology and Religious Education*⁵, Annemie Dillen and I argue for valuing the 'voices of children' as authentic sources for theology and children's theology as a new paradigm for religious education.

As already mentioned, we need to leave behind the *deficiency paradigm* that considers children as 'not yet' adults with cognitive, moral and religious limitations. It is unfair to evaluate children in the light of adult standards and adult faith.

Instead, the theology of children has its very own standards. The way children believe in God is as authentic as the way adults believe. That includes the way in which children ask direct and 'naïve' questions, sometimes make 'funny' arguments, pray in overly 'pious' ways, and come up with 'strange' insights. There is no need to be suspicious, afraid or apologetic about their questions or hesitations, as if these were anticipations of unbelief.

On the contrary, by allowing children to ask theological questions, we allow them to prepare themselves to become resilient believers in the future. *Doing theology* with the students should also turn into doing theology with the whole school team. Teachers should not only be concerned with how to *give* religious formation to children and teenagers, but also how to *receive* faith themselves by theologising alongside them. In this sense, young people and their theological quests are a call from God to all of us.

⁵ A. DILLEN & D. POLLEFEYT (ed.), *Children's Voices. Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology and Religious Education* (betl, 230), Leuven, Peeters, 2009.

8. Compliant as well as resistant relationships with the faith tradition and the Divine



Traditionally, Christians are accustomed to identifying their religious belief with *obedience*, with giving up one's own will, ideas, and desires. Many Christians regard authentic belief as a *compliant* belief. A 'good Christian' submits oneself to God as a higher power, to God's commandments and laws, to Church teachings and dogmas.

In the Jewish faith tradition, however, we find another relationship with the Divine that has too often been forgotten in Christianity. I am referring to the Talmudic custom of *wrestling with the Divine*, dialoguing, debating and even contending with God. Many biblical figures testify to a vulnerable and resistant relationship with God:

- Abraham, who defends the righteous people in the city God wants to destroy;
- Job, who questions the justice of God in light of undeserved suffering;
- or Jesus' words on the cross: "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (Mt 27:46).

Another eminent example of a theology of vulnerability in the First Testament, is *Jacob who wrestles with the Angel* (Gen. 32:23-32). Jacob fights with a stranger throughout the night until the breaking of the day. Finally, he asks his name, but the stranger refuses to give it. God remains different. Then the angel blesses Jacob and changes his name to 'Israel', meaning, 'contends-with-God'; "for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29). When the sun comes up and the stranger leaves, Jacob walks away, *limping*.

Jacob's audacity shows a resistant relationship with God that risks confronting God with his promises in the name of God's covenant. It is the confession of a God who likes children asking difficult questions, and who blesses the struggles that teenagers have with Him.


Wrestling with and resisting the Catholic tradition is not a rejection of it, but a theologically legitimate form of building relationship with God—with the God who reveals Godself through that tradition, indeed, with the God who *wrestles back*.

9. Consider positive and vulnerable life experiences in the light of faith

Dirk De Wachter
Famous Flemish psychiatrist

Young people today inadequately learn how to be 'unhappy'. Beware of too much positive psychology at school:

"We make princes and princesses of all of them. We pamper them to the extreme and we confuse this with love. We cry out to them: 'You are capable of everything!'; 'You can do everything you like!'; 'As long as it is fun!'; 'As long as you become happy!'; 'You can do all the studies in the world!'; 'You can have all possible jobs!'. But, of course, this is completely untrue. This freedom is an illusion."



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Life is not always a feast. The core of human life sometimes reveals itself in the most difficult moments.

According to Flemish psychiatrist Dirk De Wachter, the increasing stress and the large number of burnouts among young adults today is due to the fact that they have not learned how to be 'unhappy'. He warns against the risks of too much positive psychology in primary education. *"We make princes and princesses of all of them. We pamper them to the extreme and we confuse this with love. We cry out to them: 'You are capable of everything!'; 'You can do everything you like!'; 'As long as it is fun!'; 'As long as you become happy!'; 'You can do all the studies in the world!'; 'You can have all possible jobs!'. But, of course, this is completely untrue. This freedom is an illusion."*⁶

9. Consider positive and vulnerable life experiences in the light of faith

- The core of human life sometimes reveals itself in the most difficult moments.
- Too much positive psychology risks confusing the highest good of Christian life with 'happiness'.
- Price to pay: *rejection* of the Catholic faith at the inevitable moment when (religious) life thusly understood cannot keep its promise.
- Tragic irony, because the Christian message becomes particularly relevant at moments of unhappiness, brokenness, sin, suffering, and death. Especially in tough times, Christianity shows its relevance and provides resilience in the life stories of the human person.



Often, Catholic schools presume a kind of uncritical continuity between positive psychology and Catholic education, as if the highest good of the Catholic faith would be 'happiness' as defined in positive psychology. Catholic faith is reduced to a kind of 'Full-Life Insurance Policy'. The price to pay is that the

⁶ D. DE WACHTER, *De kunst van het leven is de kunst van het ongelukkig zijn*, <https://www.lifestream.nl/de-kunst-van-het-leven-is-de-kunst-van-het-ongelukkig-zijn> [accessed 15.02.2020].


Catholic faith will be rejected at the inevitable moment when (religious) life thusly understood cannot keep its promise.

This is tragic irony, since the Christian message does not guarantee a life filled with happiness, but becomes particularly relevant at moments of unhappiness, brokenness, sin, suffering, and death. Especially in tough times, Christianity shows its relevance and provides resilience in the life stories of the human person. True faith is not limp but shows itself in the limping. It has gone through disappointment, loneliness, uncertainty, unanswered questions and desires, separation from God and other people. These life experiences and negative emotions are also an integral part of the lives of children and teenagers. Educators need to recognise this and work with it, especially in Catholic religious education.

10. Do not avoid the difficult aspects of religion, especially in the Bible

10. Do not avoid the difficult aspects of religion, especially in the Bible

- It is a real challenge to extract Bible didactics from positive theology.
- When teaching young children and teens, the Bible is often presented as containing one cohesive overarching and moralistic message – which is not the case.
- The Bible is a complicated collection of texts that necessitates a didactics that allows for dialogue *with* the text, the original context, and the reader's context.
- We need a Bible didactics that fosters a resistant attitude, and a willingness to *wrestle with the text*.
- Revelation happens not so much in the text itself, but between the text and the reader(s).




Unfortunately, Bible didactics in Catholic schools are often completely embedded in positive theology. The Bible is presented to children and teenagers as one, consistent, perfect, moral message. The many difficult pericopes and principally the 'texts of terror' are conveniently skipped because they seem to undermine the harmonious ethical presentation of biblical reality.

Later in life, though, the Bible as 'ethical recipe book' is inevitably closed and put aside. This often happens when teenagers and adults stumble upon the incongruities and contradictions in the text. Or when they discover aspects in the text that do not fit within their preconceived notions of positive psychology, such as a God who has enemies executed or who rejoices in mass killings. There are Bible passages in which God requires sacrifices, even of one's own children. There are texts that contain sayings attributed to Jesus that could be read as pro-death penalty, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, et cetera.

Therefore, there is a need for a different Bible didactics that allows more place for *dialogue* with the text, with the original context of the author(s) in relation to the contemporary context of the reader(s). We need a Bible didactics that also fosters a *resistant* attitude—a willingness to *wrestle* with the text, next to the merely compliant reading of it. This presupposes that we see revelation happening not so much in the text itself, but between the text and the reader(s)⁷.

⁷ D. POLLEFEYT & R. BIERINGER, *The Role of Biblical and Religious Education Reconsidered. Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible*, in R. BIERINGER & M. ELSBERND (ed.), *Normativity of the Future. Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, Leuven-Paris-Walpole (MA), Peeters, 2010, p. 377-402.

11. Adopt an attitude of inquiry and dialogue regarding matters of faith



11. Foster an attitude of inquiry and dialogue regarding faith matters

- ECSI encourages *inquiry-based learning* in Religious Education.
- In this way, learning is achieved through questioning, investigation, and thinking critically.
- Students become active learners of the Catholic faith tradition and can take ownership of the content, making the meaning of religion relevant to their personal lives.
- When presented like this, RE becomes an invitation to discover and explore the spiritual diversity and depths within the Catholic tradition.

We are pleased to see that *inquiry-based learning* is very common in Australian schools. *Inquiry-based learning* is used to make students independent thinkers in all areas of education.

It can be fruitful especially also for a multi-correlational learning of religion. Inquiry-based learning encourages students to pose questions, to investigate, to think critically, to approach problems from multiple perspectives, and to draw conclusions about the meaning of religion for their personal lives.

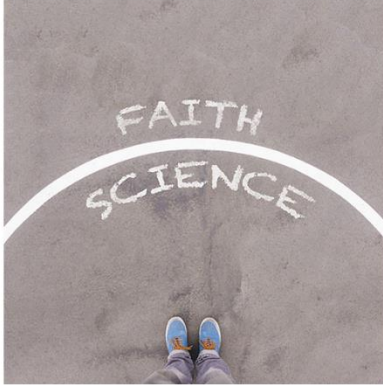
Students become active learners of the Catholic faith tradition and come to own their learning processes, instead of being passively submitted to a pre-determined mono-correlation that is artificially forced upon them. Moreover, inquiry-based learning also contains an invitation to discover and to experience a rich diversity of spiritualities that are present and active inside the Catholic faith tradition.

It is important that the teachers are also actively involved in this process of inquiry regarding the Catholic faith. This is hardly possible or even not allowed in a school context that is a mono-correlational Catholic safe-haven. Sometimes, we see in Catholic schools signs of a 'taboo' regarding critical questions, searching into the tradition, trying to find new answers to old questions, or regarding much-needed *Recontextualisations* of old concepts, traditions, and rituals. In turn, the taboo keeps the 'Catholic balloon' inflated and intact, while the school members—students and teachers alike—disconnect their professional behaviour from their private experiences of faith.

12. Dialogue between science and faith

12. Create a dialogue between science and faith

- Mono-correlational pedagogy risks instilling *Literal Belief* in young students, which can reinforce a binary cognitive approach.
- Oftentimes, when religious belief is abandoned, *Literal Disbelief* takes hold.
- One all-encompassing worldview is replaced by another: science holding all the answers to life's questions.
- Encouraging a critical dialogue between science and faith is paramount.
- Science does not simply confirm Christianity (*Literal Belief*) nor is it just a rejection of religion (*External Critique*), but instead is a partner in the search for understanding humanity and the world in which we live.




One of the risks of a mono-correlational pedagogy in (religious) education is that it introduces *Literal Belief* in students and, on a deeper level, that it installs in them a *binary way of thinking*. When *Literal Belief* becomes—unavoidably—untenable, it is nonetheless possible that the binary cognitive belief structure remains intact. It often happens that religion, once the all-encompassing system to answer life's questions, is replaced by *science* as the dominant lens for purpose and meaning. *Literal Belief* is replaced by literal unbelief. Nonetheless, it remains *literal*. Authority is given only to what is scientifically known and proven. The mono-correlation remains intact, but the difference is that the correlation now happens with science instead of religion. The latter is rejected as un-scientific or even anti-scientific.

For that reason, a critical dialogue between science and faith is crucial, especially in secondary schools, although this dialogue must be present in primary education as well. In such a dialogue, science is neither just a simple confirmation of the Christian story (*Literal Belief*), nor just a rejection of religion (*External Critique*), but a partner in the search for a better understanding of human nature and of the world in which we live—even though science and faith ultimately speak 'different languages' and the results of their inquiries belong to different discourses⁸.

⁸ L. BOEVE, *God onderbreekt de geschiedenis. Theologie in tijden van ommekeer*. Kapellen, Uitgeverij Pelckmans, 2006, 128-151.

13. Introduce theologies of vulnerability and responsibility in teacher training and staff formation



St Thomas Aquinas
(1225-1274)


"Ultimately, we know God as *unknown*."

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"Ultimately, we know God as unknown", St Thomas Aquinas wrote in his work on the Trinity.

POPE JOHN PAUL II
Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*,
1988

"For biblical Revelation says that, while man's 'likeness' to God is true, the 'non-likeness' which separates the whole of creation from the Creator is still more essentially true".



More recently, Pope John Paul II wrote in *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "For biblical Revelation says that, while man's 'likeness' to God is true, the 'non-likeness' which separates the whole of creation from the Creator is still more essentially true"⁹.

⁹ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Letter Mulieris dignitatem. On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year*, Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, paragraph 8.

13. Introduce theologies of vulnerability and responsibility in teacher training and staff formation

- Quotes like these warn us against theology becoming too positive and running the risk of misleading (young) people. One-sided positive theology diminishes the mystery and the incomprehensibility of the Creator. People confuse God with what God is not.
- In teacher training programs and staff formation, positive and negative theologies should complement each other.
- Teacher educators need to underscore more what God is *not* or what *cannot* be known about God. "This is *not* of God." "This is *not* God's will."
- Attitude of modesty, discipline, austerity, and humility.

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Quotes like these warn us against theology becoming too positive and running the risk of misleading (young) people. Here's a warning that must clearly sound in teacher training programs and staff formation sessions in Catholic schools.

Too much unilaterally positive theology may give the impression that human reason and experience would be able to understand God completely and unequivocally. This runs the risk of assuming that it can make Jesus completely accessible to the degree that it diminishes the mystery and the incomprehensibility of the Creator. In that case, people confuse God with what God is not.

In teacher training programs and staff formation, positive and negative theologies should complement each other. Teacher educators need to underscore what God is *not* or what *cannot* be known about God. In education, we need to have the courage to say more often and more clearly that certain things and situations "are not of God", that they "are not God's will". This requires a spiritual attitude of modesty, discipline, austerity, and humility.

14. Take it serious when students reject God: look for God in the negation



14. Take it serious when students reject God: look for God in the negation

- "I no longer believe in God", is a genuine theological statement, and should be taken seriously.
- Is it a critique of a too-positive theology? Clarifying who God is *not* can be as useful as trying to understand how God is being positively revealed.
- Teenagers often reject a God who lacks cultural and personal plausibility.
- Could this rejection perhaps create the necessary space to discover God anew in a different way? Can we accompany our students on this *via negativa*? Can we help them to discover God through the negation?

When teenagers or young adults admit that they "no longer believe in God", in many cases they are in fact vocalising critique of a too-positive theology: of themselves expressing instead who God is *not*. Such expressions are genuine theological statements that need to be taken seriously. Clarifying who God is *not* can be as useful as trying to understand how God is being positively revealed.

Teenagers often reject a God who lacks cultural and personal plausibility. Could this rejection perhaps create the necessary space to discover God anew in another way? Can we accompany our students on this *via negativa*, joining them in their inquiries, struggles, and hesitations? Can we take the risk, together with our students, of encountering that 'other God' who reveals Godself as an immense depth, as Light in the shadow of vast unknowability?

Perhaps this is the biggest challenge of all for religious education in our time: can students 'in' and 'beyond' theologies of vulnerability and responsibility discover anew that God, who truly lives, and who, from beyond and with limitless Love, seeks relationship with us?

6. Summary and conclusion

All over the world, Catholic schools are respected institutions that are renowned for the quality of the education they offer. They create an educational context, inspired by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to prepare the next generations to become competent, responsible, and distinguished citizens. No doubt, a positive Gospel message can contribute to such a formation.

It is not our intent to question the power and the success of these kinds of Catholic educational contexts. Parents rightfully expect from Catholic schools a focus on safety, quality, positivity and faith.¹⁰

Notwithstanding these educational qualities, however, the ECSI research data confront us with a dramatic and increasing decline in the affiliation of students with the Catholic religion. Even though many primary school children conform with the Catholic religion at school, a vast majority of them will have left faith behind by the time they turn eighteen, never to return.

Our explanation is that, regarding religious formation, 'too much good is bad'. Many Catholic schools are prepossessed with a positive psychology that they connect too closely with positive theology. Schools risk neglecting the development of certain religious capacities in young people, or even discouraging and eliminating these capacities through the continual use of 'mono-correlation'. The result is that, for the upcoming generation, religious faith fails to be a pertinent dialogue partner when life reveals its complexities and challenges.

For this reason we suggest introducing in religious education in primary and secondary schools—next to positive theology—more *interruptive* experiences framed in theologies of vulnerability and responsibility. We propose to shift the focus of attention in religious education to a deeper and more complete understanding of religious human life. Such understanding includes challenging experiences, such as: not-knowing, doubt, silence, mystery, struggle, resistance, estrangement, loss of meaning, tragedy, and brokenness. These are eminent places where people discover traces of God, mysteries that somehow reveal the Transcendent Reality.

The hypothesis is that these adjustments would create more resilient believers whose faith is embedded more deeply in their existence. When life becomes more complex and challenging, they would be able to interpret their life in the light of Catholic faith in new, flexible and creative ways.

¹⁰ For the perspective of parents in Catholic schools, see the important work of my Dutch colleague T. Elshof, *Primary School Parent's Perspectives on Religious Education*, in *Global Perspectives on Catholic Religious Education in Schools*, Singapore, Springer, 2019, chapter 10, pp. 113-124.

The right balance

The positive perspective is paramount, although never without interruption

Important: find the right balance between positive theology and theologies of vulnerability and responsibility. From a Catholic point of view, the positive perspective is paramount, although never without interruption.

- Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge positive theology, destroy the ultimate perspective to which the Catholic faith is finally oriented.
- Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge negative theology, overlook the significance of Christian faith, spirituality and psychology in dealing with the 'darkness' that is part of life.

Positive theology	Theologies of vulnerability and responsibility
Importance of forgiveness	Yes but ... there is no forgiveness without sin.
The eucharistic presence of Christ	Yes but ... there is no eucharist without sacrifice.
The significance of Easter and Resurrection	Yes but ... there is no Easter without Good Friday.

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Catholic religious education needs to find the right balance between positive theology and theologies of vulnerability and responsibility.

From a Catholic point of view, the positive perspective is paramount, although never without interruption.

- Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge the central meaning of, for example, forgiveness, the eucharistic presence of Christ, or the significance of Easter, would destroy the ultimate perspective to which the Catholic faith is finally oriented.
- But at the same time we must remember that there is no forgiveness without sin, no eucharist without sacrifice, and no Easter without Good Friday. Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge sin, sacrifice or crucifixion move into perilous territory.

Mystery of suffering, mystery of love

Do not ignore the darkness

- The absence of the good, the experience of 'darkness', and the reality of suffering, are part of human life.
- Avoiding or repressing the 'darkness' is also depriving oneself of the depths of God's enduring presence in the 'night'.
- Ignoring the darker aspects of human existence begets only ignorance of it. Concealing it enlivens it to fester in the lives of people, and in the Church itself.
- Christianity connects the mystery of suffering with the mystery of love, and both are mysterious indeed. "The mystery of suffering can only be met by the mystery of care", not by avoiding the darkness altogether.




Twelfth Station: Christ dies on the cross.
Flemish artist Albert Servaes, 1919


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After all, suffering the 'darkness' is part of life. To repress the darkness is also to deprive oneself of the depths of God's enduring presence in the night. It is to suppress a resource—not only for 'overcoming the darkness' but for enduring, for thriving, bold-faced toward the difficult issues lived daily and uniquely in the context our Catholic schools today. Ignoring the darker aspects of human existence begets only ignorance of it, while suppressing the darkness only conceals it and enlivens it to fester in the lives of people and in the Church itself.




"The mystery of suffering
can only be met
by the mystery of care."



Mary Patricia McAleese, Catholic academic and 8th president of Ireland (1997-2011).

"The mystery of suffering can only be met by the mystery of care",¹¹ not by avoiding the darkness altogether.



*Actually I don't believe anything,
And I doubt everything, even You.
But sometimes, when I think that You live truly,
Then I think that You are Love, and lonely,
And that, with the same despair, You seek me,
As I seek You.*

Closure of the Day
Gerard Reve

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*Actually I don't believe anything,
And I doubt everything, even You.
But sometimes, when I think that You live truly,
Then I think that You are Love, and lonely,
And that, with the same despair, You seek me,
As I seek You.*

Gerard Reve, *Closure of the Day*¹²

¹¹ Quote from Mary Patricia McAleese, Catholic academic and eighth president of Ireland (1997-2011).

¹² Prayer written by the Dutch poet Gerard Kornelis van het Reve (1923-2006), published in the poem collection titled: *Nader tot U (Closer to You)*, Amsterdam, G.A. van Oorschot, 1966. It is also the lyric of a song composed by Bernard Huijbers (1922-2003).

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