

KU LEUVEN

Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI)

Teaching the Unteachable, or why too much good is bad.

Positive theology and negative theologies
of vulnerability and responsibility

Prof. Dr. Didier Pollefeyt – Drs. Jan Bouwens
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Positive theology and psychology

Introduction: interview with year 6 students (August 2019)

Positive theology and psychology

Creating a strong school environment to foster basic trust

- In Australia and in Catholic schools around the world, there is a strong emphasis on 'Gospel values'. These create a warm, harmonious, and welcoming environment where students develop a sense of basic trust and become strong-rooted and morally inspired personalities.
- A desire to 'make Jesus real'. Tendencies towards *Literal Belief*.
- Many educators intrinsically connect a 'positive theology' with an educational approach rooted in 'positive psychology' that stresses individual and communal well-being.
- 'Positive psychology' as a highway to 'positive theology'.
- Risk: 'happiness' is harmonised 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...

Interview with year 6 students

Positive theology at work in a Catholic school



August 2019

Audio + transcript (3:24)



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."*

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."*

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."*

Prof. Pollefeyt: *"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..."*

Prof. Pollefeyt: *"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."*

Student: *"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."

Prof. Pollefeyt: "And what do you say about it?"

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

Other student: "That God always has a plan to ...
Well, He did this for a reason."

Prof. Pollefeyt: *"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."*

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

Moderator: *"Hmm."*

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.

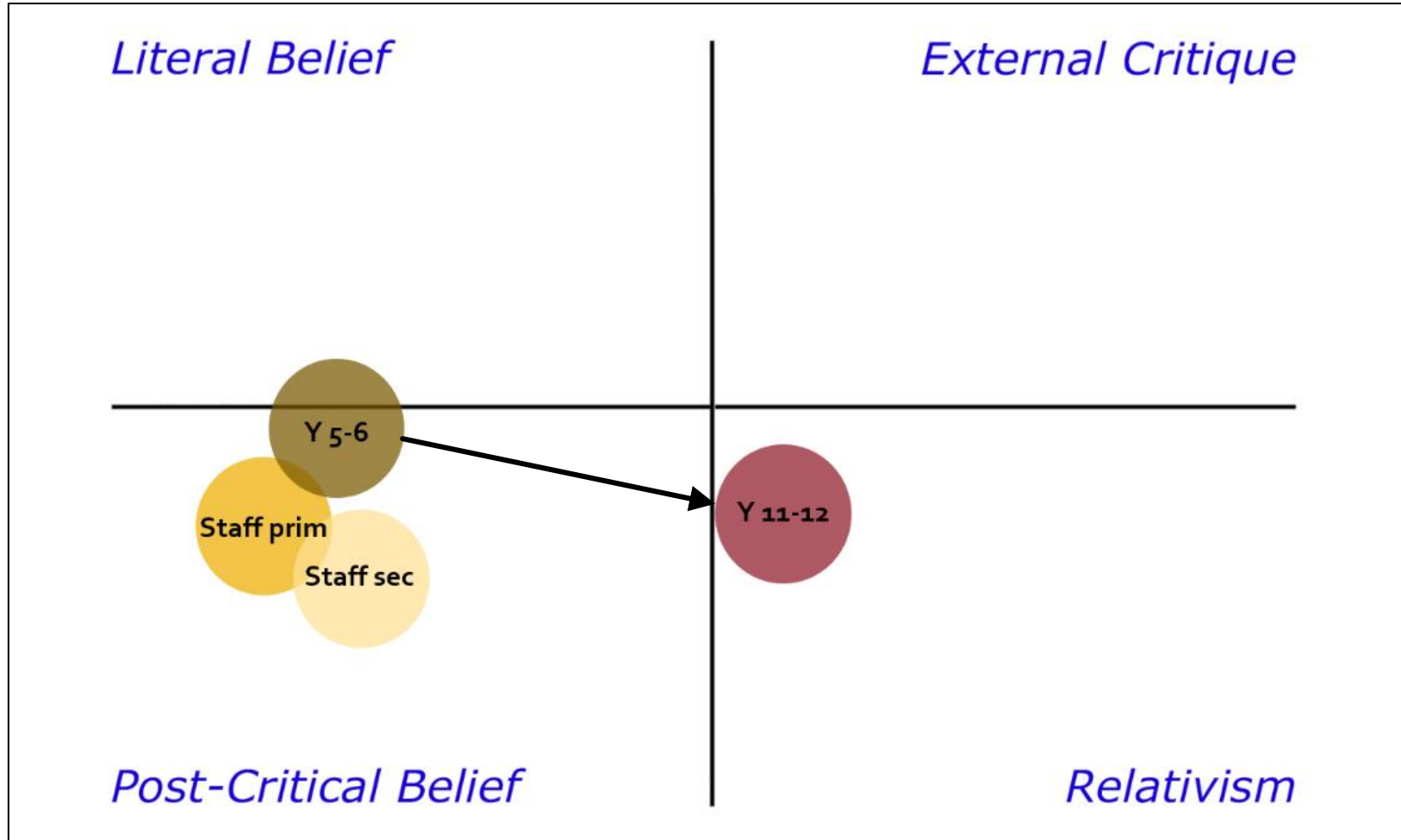
Interview with year 6 students

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 'naive' 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.

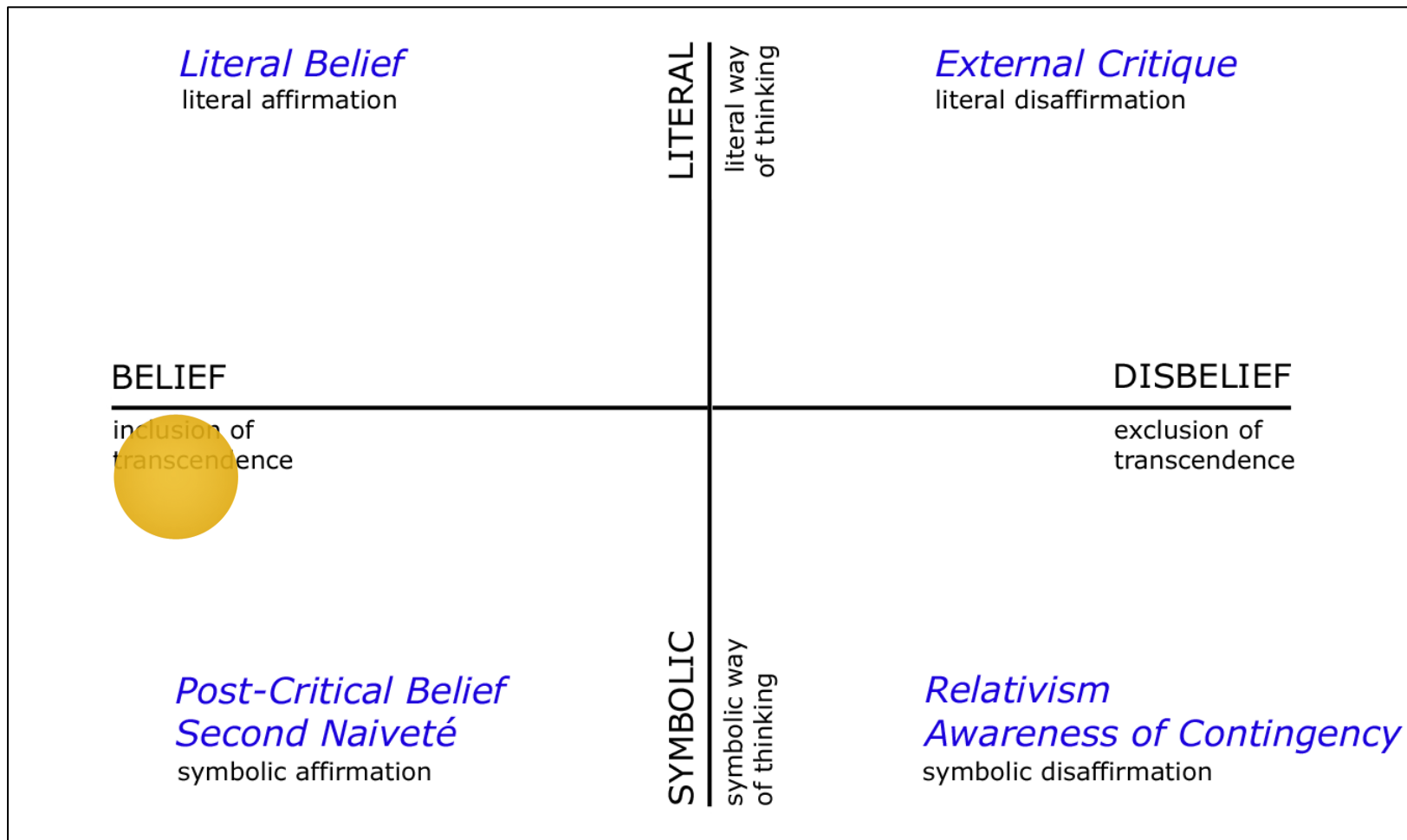
From *Post-Critical / Literal Belief* to *Relativism*

Long-term effects of positive theology aligned with positive psychology



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

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

Positive theology as well as theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Making room in Catholic schools for multiple perspectives

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'.

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary



Positive theology	Theologies of vulnerability and responsibility
Considers God as certain, predictable, and knowable through the human experience.	Consider God in terms of Otherness and even of Hiddenness and Absence.
People can positively connect to and identify with God through human experience, in which God is <i>mediated</i> .	God remains hidden from direct human experience. Human experience always falls short of actually grasping the Divine.
We are compelled to try to connect to God and believe we can actually do this.	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).
Through the Catholic faith tradition, we seek out a strong and vivid covenantal connection with the Divine Reality.	God reveals Godself as 'the Other in the other'. God comes from elsewhere, is radically different, 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."*



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!

Theologies of vulnerability

Being *interrupted* makes us feel vulnerable and leaves us longing



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.

- 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).

Theologies of vulnerability



Medieval Christian mystics offer strong testimony regarding the search for God in the 'dark night'.

Religious language, stories, rituals, and symbols express a God of *Otherness* and give rise to liminal experiences of not-knowing, interruption, and paradoxes.

Instead of revealing Godself, God rather hides from us. God seems to escape any attempt at definition through words, references and symbols.



**"For now we see in a mirror, dimly,
but then we will see face to face."**

(St Paul, 1 Cor. 13:12)

Mapping the spirituality of teachers

A framework for understanding



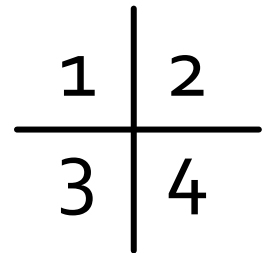
The Hermeneutical-Communicative Model at Work in the Primary Classroom. Empirical and Theological Research

Dr Rina Madden, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, 2018.

Promotor: Didier Pollefeyt & Kevin Lenehan.

To analyse the spirituality of Australian primary school teachers, Dr Madden constructed a framework based on two axes:

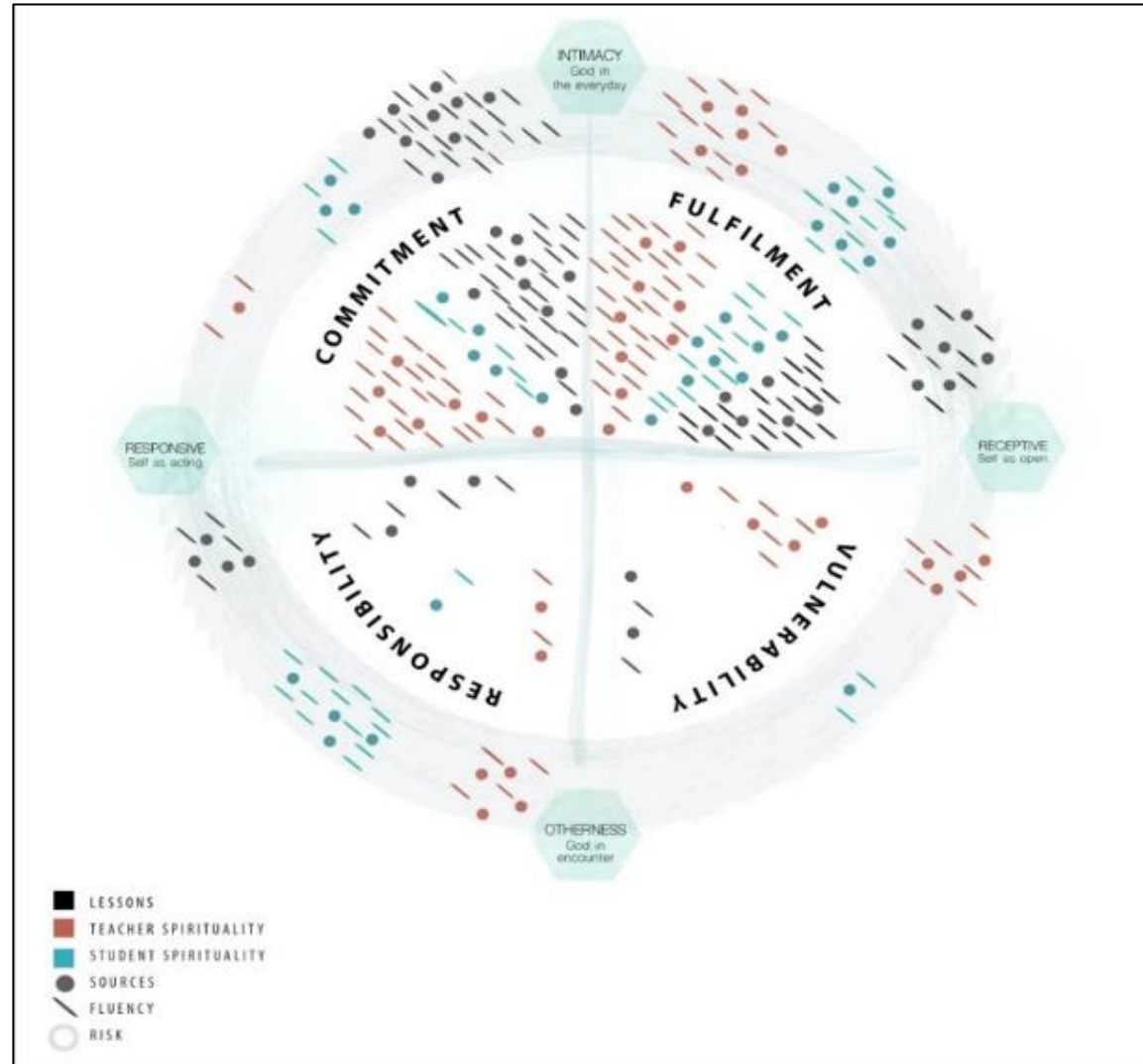
- The horizontal axis relates to faith in terms of *activity* versus *passivity*
- The vertical axis relates to how teachers experience the transcendent, whether in terms of *intimacy* or *otherness*.



→ Resulting from this is a '**spirituality**' framework consisting of four quadrants.

Mapping teacher responses

Commitment, Fulfilment, Responsibility and Vulnerability



Mapping the spirituality of teachers

A framework



- Dr Madden's analysis of the research findings reveal that most of the respondents are comfortable in positive theology—this is true for both students and teachers and the general learning environment promoted in these schools.
- This confirms the the qualitative findings from the interviews: that positive theology is prevalent in most Catholic primary school environments.
- Dr Madden writes: "The themes of forgiveness and reconciliation, cooperation and sharing, of finding satisfaction and peace through appreciating the beauty of the natural environment and in relationships with others are also neat and useful connections between an understanding of spirituality and wellbeing, made by teachers in their religious education lessons." (p.237)
- Yet transitioning to secondary education, positive theology is mostly replaced with secular positive pedagogy and psychology.

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.

Hermeneutical Intersections

That express a negative theological point of view



Q1. Is it possible to speak about God? Is God knowable? Is God graspable with limited human capacities?

The mindset of positive theology believes so, by arguing that God is, for example, good, just, merciful or severe.

Negative theology, however, starts from the principle that God is unknowable. The God of negative theology is the hidden God, the God of silence, the God of emptiness, who always transcends human language and human thought.

Hermeneutical Intersections

That express a negative theological point of view



Q2. In the history of Christianity, negative theology was regularly considered suspect or even heretical by church authorities. Can we therefore consider negative theology as the opposite of positive theology, with one excluding the other?

Alternatively, we can argue that negative theology has influenced Christian thought since the early church fathers. Should we therefore rather assume that negative theology is the counterpart of positive theology, with the two complementing and reinforcing each other?

Or, as others argue, does negative theology provide a necessary interruption or disruption to the positive-theological narrative?

Hermeneutical Intersections

That express a negative theological point of view



Q3. Some argue that negative theology leads to an overly abstract and detached image of God that does not correspond to the loving and merciful God of the gospel.

Others, however, believe that the radical otherness of God enables true engagement with creation.

Still others stress that the hidden God can reveal Godself when people face negative experiences of suffering and vulnerability. It is in those places and moments where God seems most absent that God is most felt in God's otherness, including through the resistance and outrage evoked by suffering.

Hermeneutical Intersections

That express a negative theological point of view

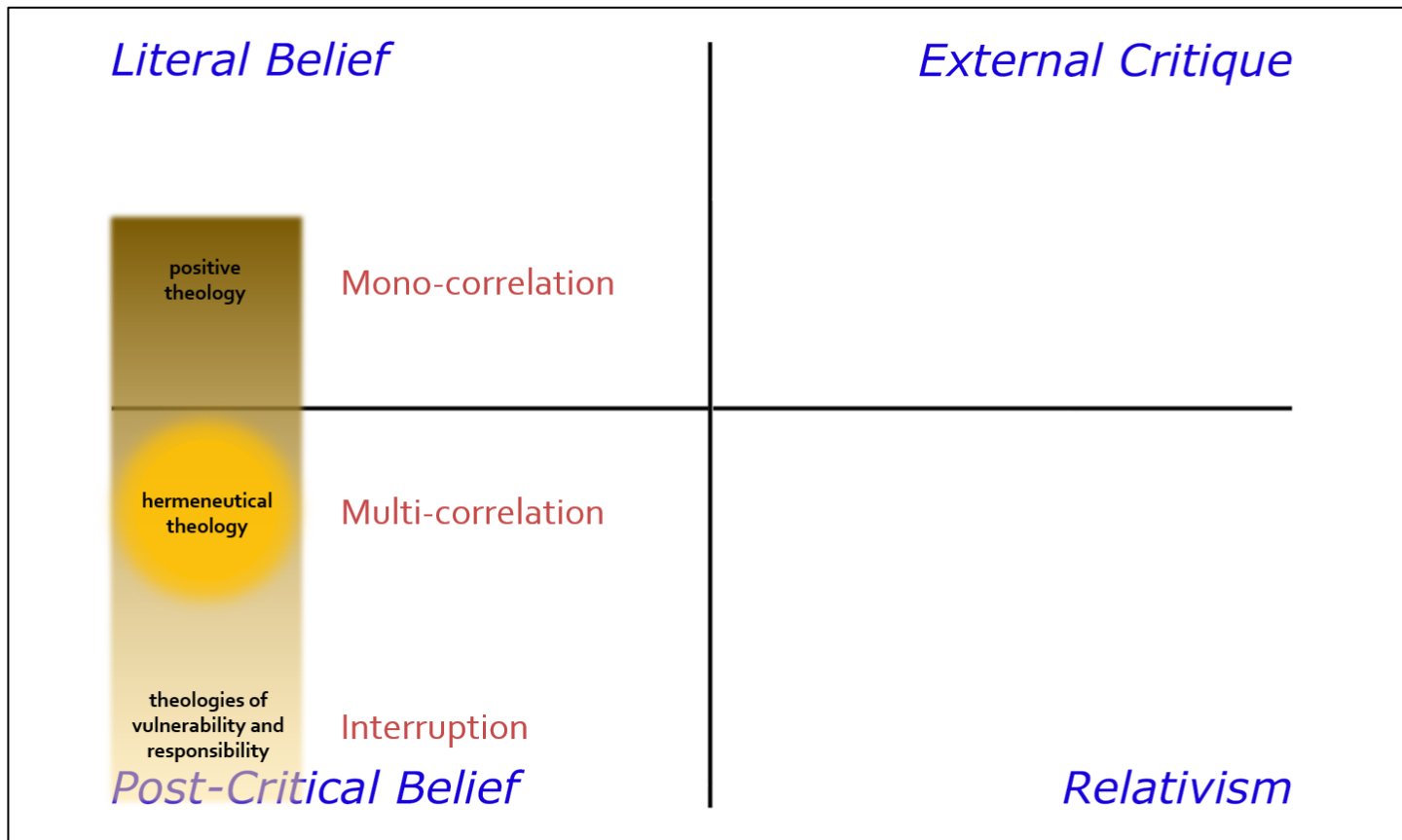


Q4. Some thinkers believe that consistent negative theology culminates in a relativistic, postmodern attitude to life. According to them, even the truth claims of the Christian tradition could be deconstructed or relativised, such as the incarnation or even the existence of God. In this way, negative theology would lead to a form of atheism.

Lieven Boeve, however, believes that negative theology provides a hermeneutic dynamic within an open Christian narrative. The perspective of the completely 'other' God constantly illuminates new meanings of Christian faith content and can provide renewed relevance to the Christian narrative.

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary



Positive theology and theologies of responsibility and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they exist on a continuum.

They articulate different dimensions of religious experience. Tension + mutual correction

There cannot be a preference for either approach. Invitation to engage with BOTH theological traditions!

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary



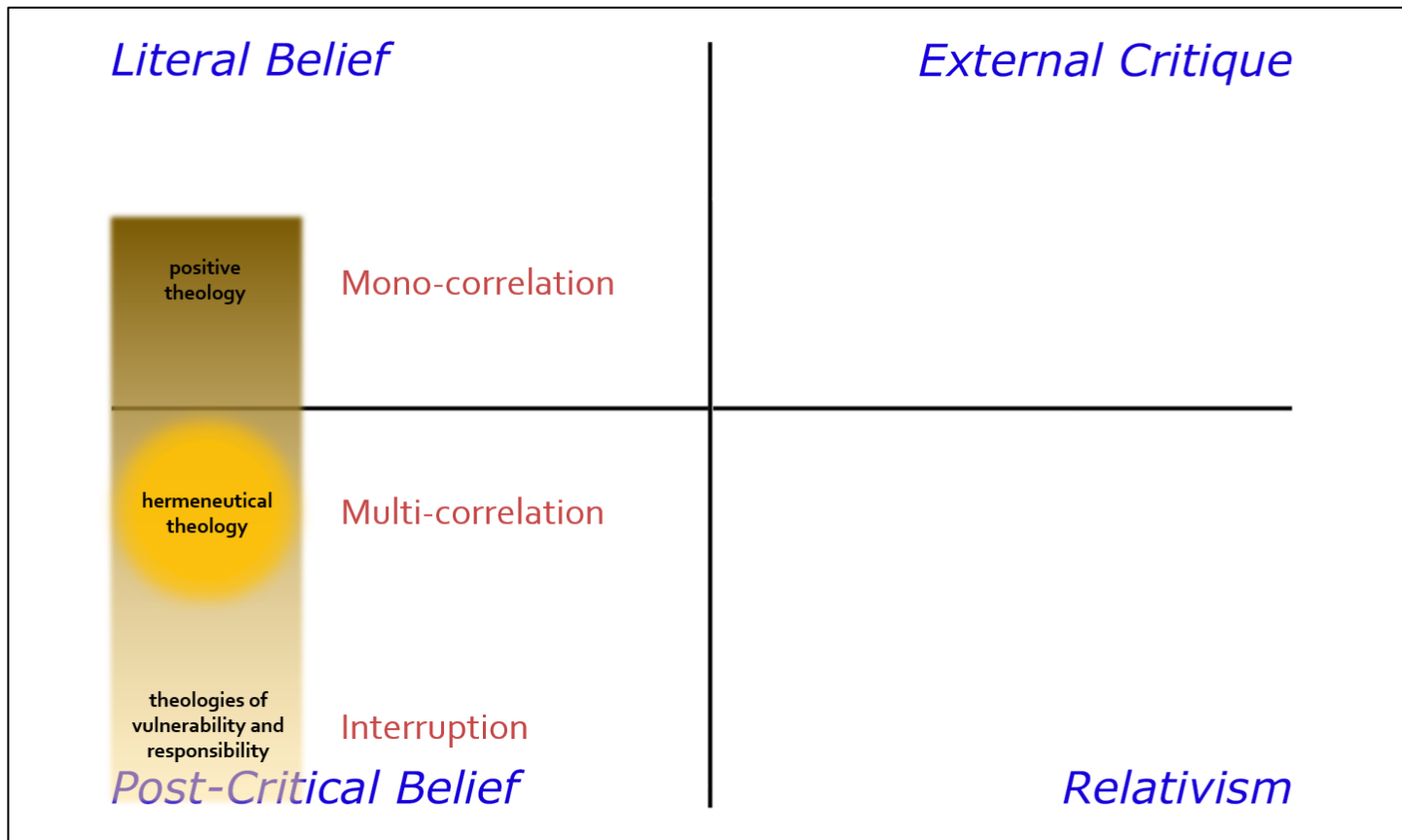
From a belief based solely on answers and certainty ...	to a belief that can also deal with questions and the search for truth.
From a belief based only on knowing ...	to a belief that can also embrace not-knowing and open-endedness.
From only finding answers and solutions in faith ...	to also probing 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.

Positive theology vs theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Distinct but complementary



ECSI identifies with a hermeneutical theology that assumes a middle position between an exclusively-positive theology and theologies that refer exclusively to vulnerability and responsibility.

The 'golden dot' is positioned between the mono-correlational approach and the interruptive approach.

Based on a hermeneutical, multi-correlational approach to the tradition.

Hermeneutical-Communicative Model (HCM) for religious education.

PTI Resurrection, preview

Prof. Pollefeyt explains the ECSI view on resurrection
from a positive and a negative theological point of view

PTI Resurrection, preview

Learning the ECSI view on resurrection



In Movement Three of the new PTI, we recorded Professor Didier Pollefeyt reflecting on the ECSI view of resurrection in seven short video clips, entitled as follows:

- *An ECSI Perspective on Resurrection* (1:40)
- *The Centrality of the Resurrection* (4:31)
- *Negative Theology and Resurrection* (4:43)
- *Positive Theology and Resurrection* (4:59)
- *The Resurrection of the Body* (4:27)
- *The Risen Christ* (2:41)
- *My Preferred Mediation* (3:49)

Total running time: 26 minutes and 50 seconds



Reflections by Professor Pollefeyt

Negative theology and resurrection



[Negative Theology and Resurrection \(Youtube, 4:43\)](#)

Reflections by Professor Pollefeyt

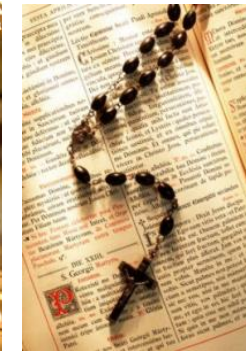
Positive theology and resurrection



[Positive Theology and Resurrection \(Youtube, 4:59\)](#)

Sacred Spaces in the Catholic Dialogue School

Expressing either positive theology, a lack thereof,
negative theology, or hermeneutical theology



When sacred spaces are an expression of positive theology.





Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris
Catastrophic fire on 15 April 2019

Empty 'neutral' space

The Silent Room in High School VIVES, Brugge (Belgium)



Empty 'neutral' space

The Silent Room in High School VIVES, Brugge (Belgium)



Empty 'neutral' space

The Silent Room in High School VIVES, Brugge (Belgium)

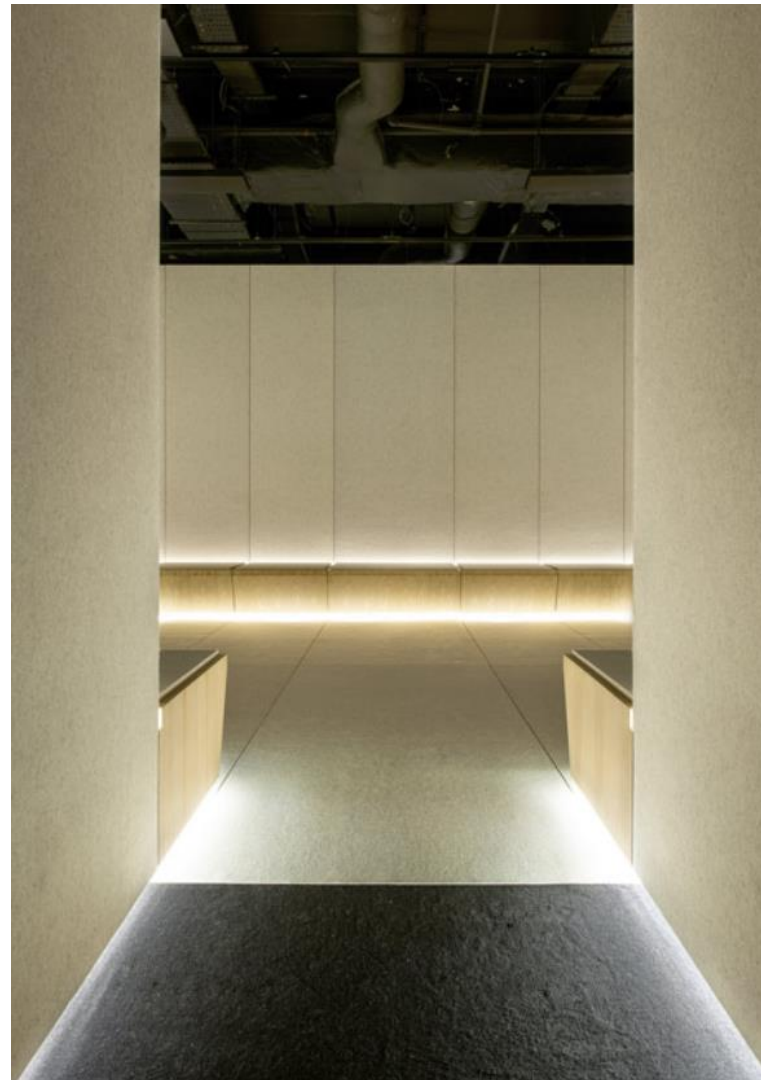


Empty 'neutral' space

The Silence Room, Selfridges Department Store (London, UK)

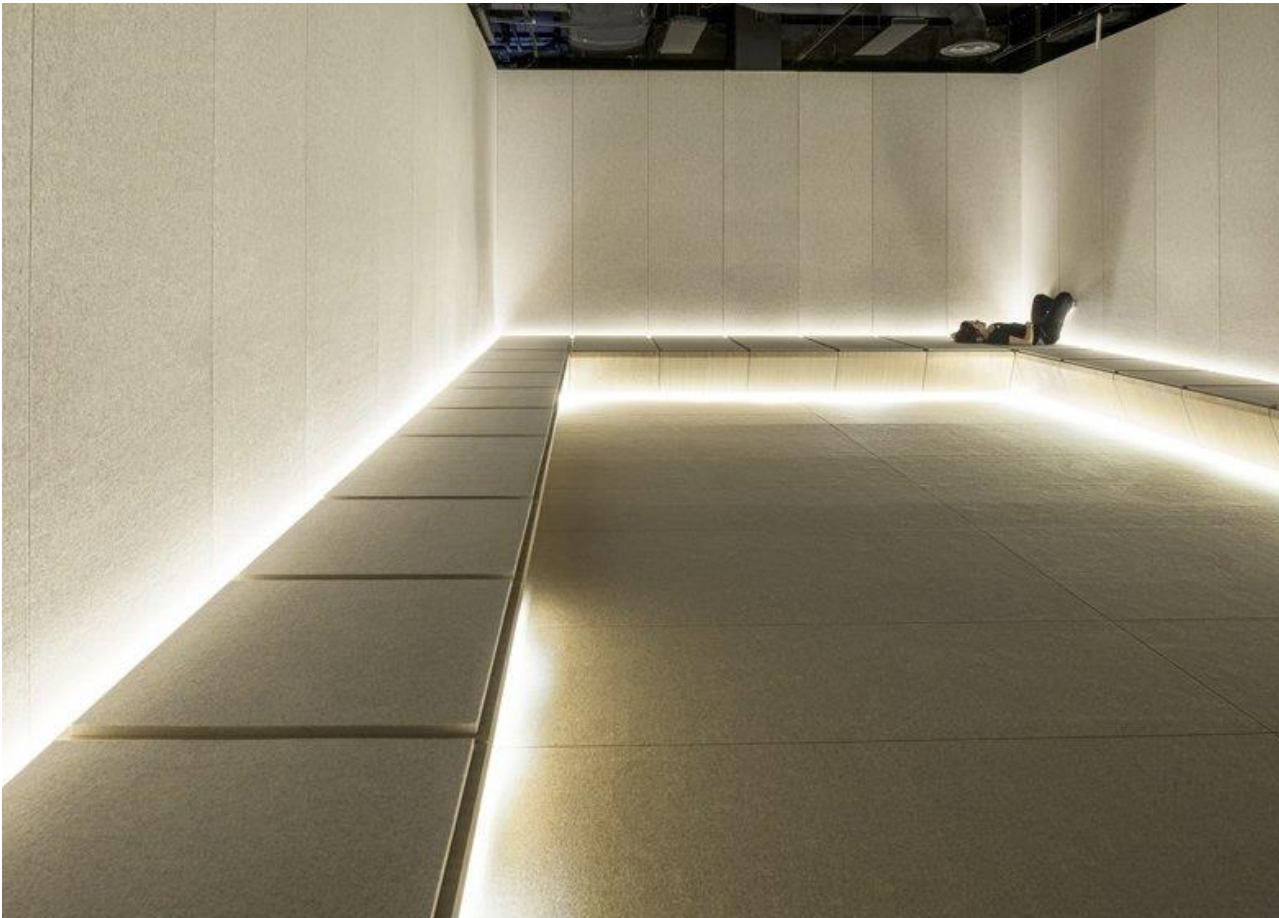


Selfridges Department Store, London



Empty 'neutral' space

The Silence Room, Selfridges Department Store (London, UK)



Empty sacred space: expression of negative theology

De kapel van het Niets (*The Chapel of Nothing*)



Empty sacred space: expression of negative theology

De kapel van het Niets (*The Chapel of Nothing*)



Empty sacred space: expression of negative theology

De Doorkijkerkerk (the See-Through Church) in Borgloon, Flanders



Reading Between the Lines

Empty sacred space: expression of negative theology

De Doorkijkerker (the See-Through Church) in Borgloon, Flanders



A Catholic hermeneutical sacred space

The Chapel of Disclosure, De La Salle Brothers, Groot-Bijgaarden (Flanders, Belgium)



Flemish Lassalian Perspective, Groot-Bijgaarden. Designed by Tom Callebaut and Cindy Tirry, TCCT

A Catholic hermeneutical sacred space

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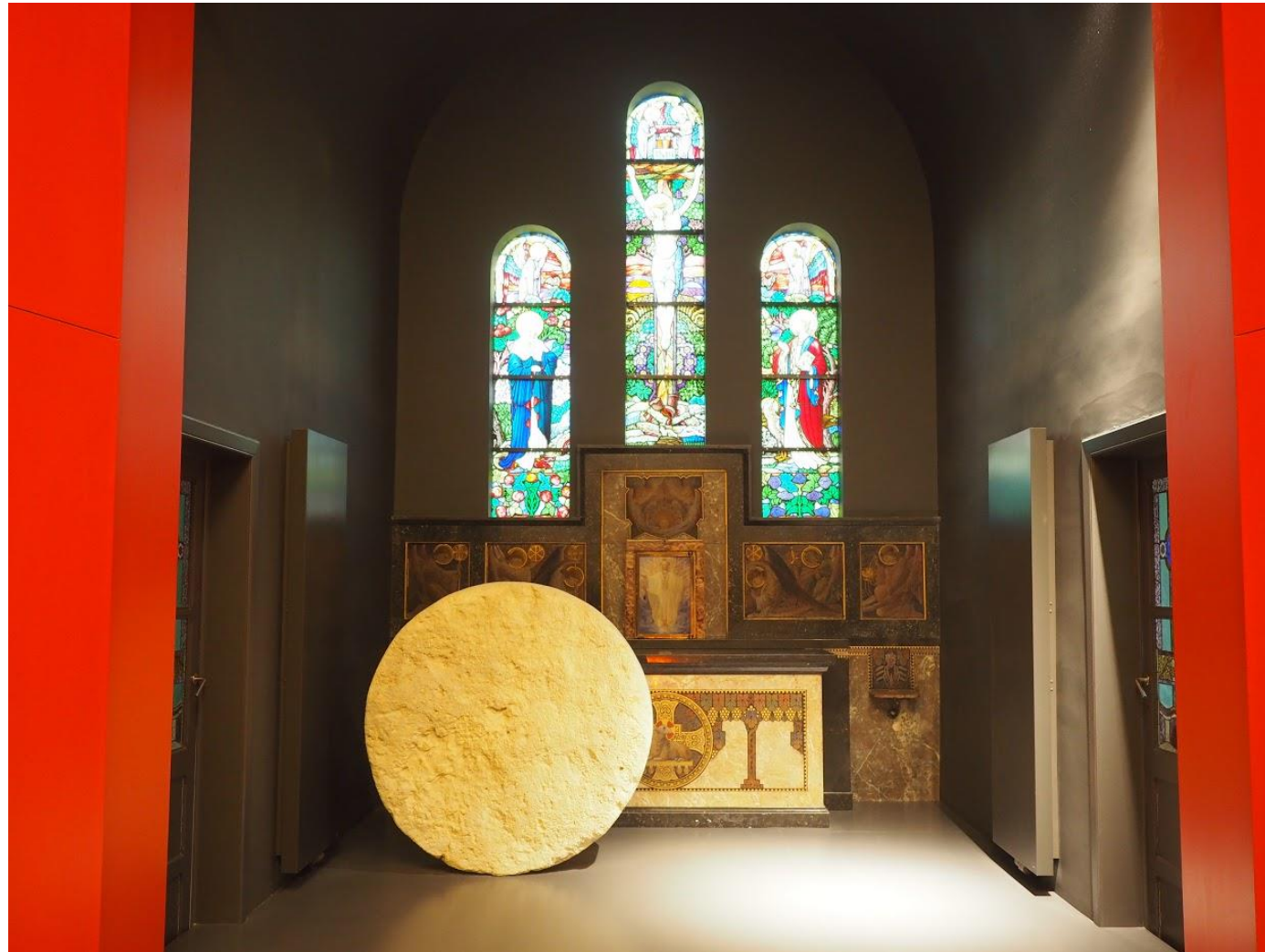
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Teaching the Unteachable or why too much good is bad

Conclusion. Interrupt the pattern of positive theology
by introducing theologies of vulnerability and responsibility

Shifting the focus from the positive

Dealing with the story told by the data

- Catholic schools are respected institutions that are renowned for educational QUALITY. A positive Gospel message contributes to such a formation.
- Of course, it is not our intent to question the success of Catholic educational contexts!
- However, the ECSI research data confront us with a dramatic and increasing decline in the affiliation of students with the Catholic religion. Catholic faith and identity are *dissipating* !
- When teaching the *Unteachable*, 'too much good is bad'.
- Many Catholic schools are prepossessed with a positive psychology that they connect too closely with positive theology.
- The result is an *uneven* development — even an *arrested* development through the use of 'mono-correlation' — of the religious capacities of young people.

Shifting the focus from the positive

Enhancing Catholic school identity

- We suggest introducing in religious education — next to positive theology — more *interruptive* experiences framed in theologies of vulnerability and responsibility.
- A deeper and more complete understanding of religious human life – in light of the Gospel.
- Include challenging experiences and wrestle with them: *not-knowing, doubt, silence, mystery, struggle, resistance, estrangement, loss of meaning, tragedy, brokenness, death*.
- These are eminent places where people discover traces of God, mysteries that somehow reveal the Transcendent Reality.
- Hypothesis: students grow into 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.

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:

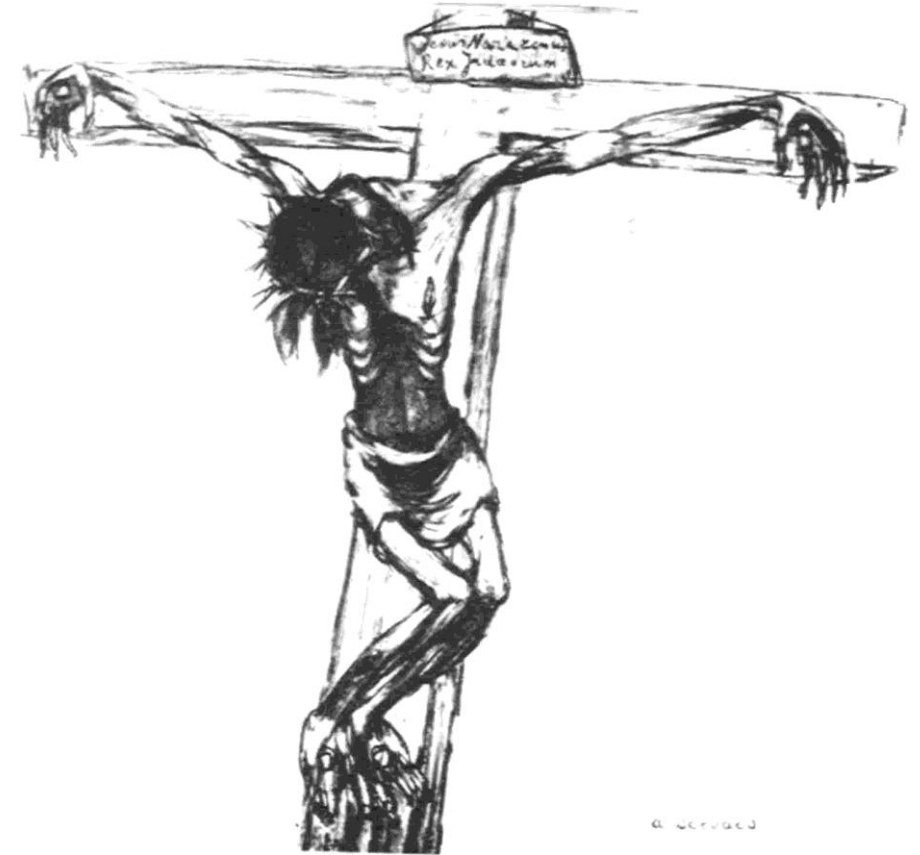
- Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge positive theology, destroy the ultimate perspective to which the Catholic faith is finally oriented.
- Believers who fail to appropriately acknowledge negative theology, overlook the significance of Christian faith, spirituality and psychology in dealing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

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

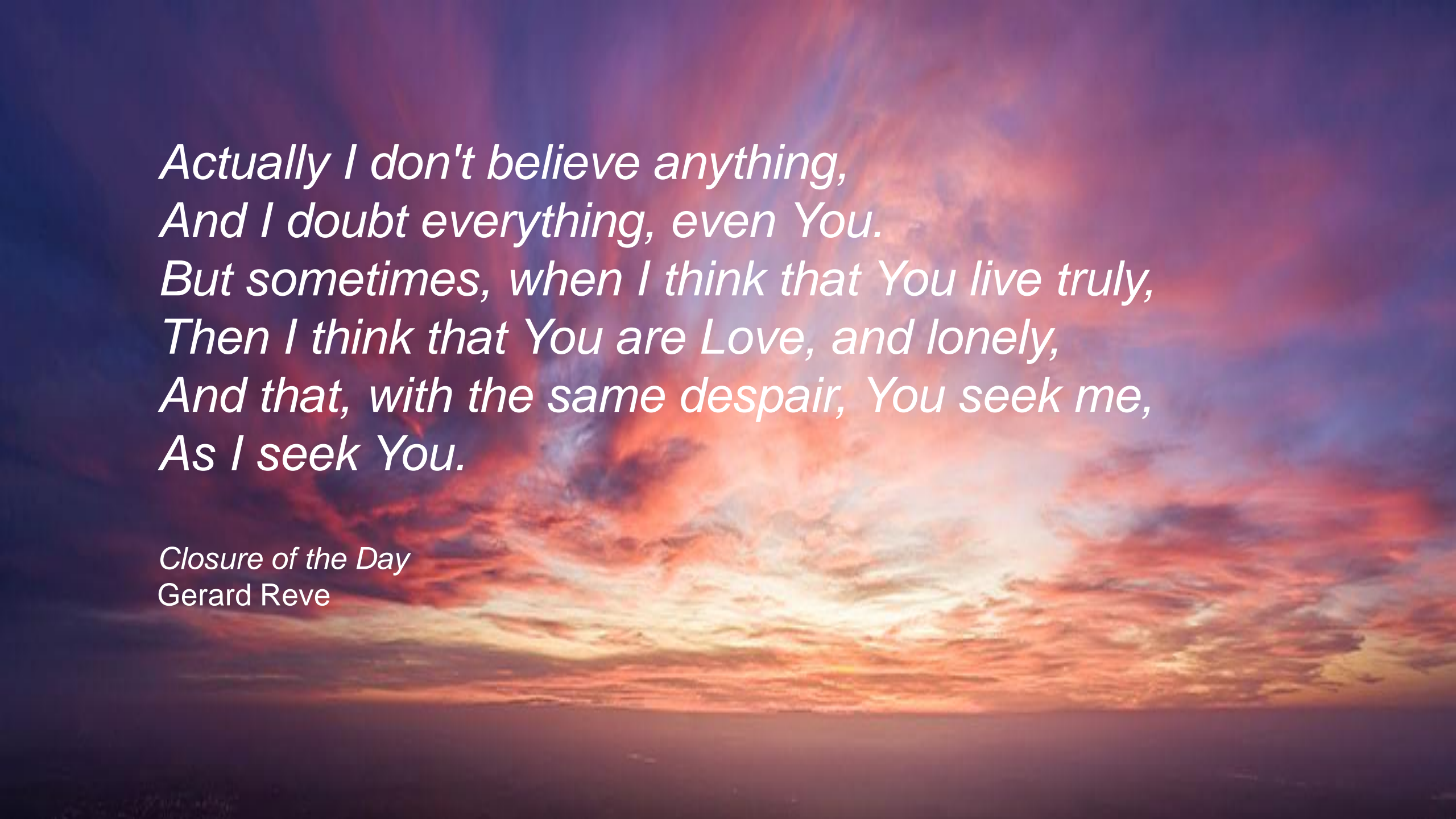
The mystery of suffering...



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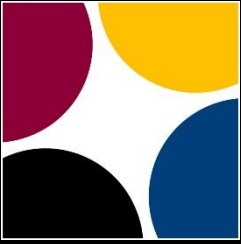


Mary Patricia McAleese,
Catholic academic and 8th president
of Ireland (1997-2011).



*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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