
TEOLOGIA / THEOLOGY

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**VULGARISED RAHNERIANISM
AND POST-CRITICAL RECONTEXTUALISATION:
SOLVENTS OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY
IN CONTEMPORARY CATECHESIS**

Introduction

In a 2010 series of interviews with journalist Peter Seewald, Pope Benedict XVI made a candid admission regarding the current state of Catholic school education. Seewald asked him how it was possible that, despite spending years in Catholic schools under the direction of dioceses, students in the Western world seem to end up knowing more about Buddhism than their own faith. The Pope made no attempt to defend the efforts of the schools, but replied, disarmingly:

„That is a question I also ask myself. Every child in Germany has nine to thirteen years of religion in school. Why, in spite of that, so very little sticks, if I may put it like that, is incomprehensible. You are right that the bishops must seriously reflect on ways to give catechesis a new heart and a new face.”¹

Perhaps, one could begin to assess the problem by recalling that in 1847, the American Congregational theologian, Horace Bushnell, published his classic work, *Christian Nurture*, wherein he confronted two tendencies in the educational practices of the Evangelical Christianity of his time: „*extreme individualism*” and extravagant claims for the doctrine of free will. In making these claims, Bushnell alluded with good-natured envy to the success of the catechetical endeavours of the Catho-

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¹ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A conversation with Peter Seewald*. Trans. Michael J. Miller and Adrian J. Walker. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 140.

lic Church.² Indeed, Catholic educational practices, especially in the schools, have had a long history of effectiveness in training successive generations in their religious duties. At the outset of the twenty-first century, however, it would seem that Catholic schools are now facing broadly similar problems to those identified by Bushnell. It appears that many of them are substantially failing in their mission to hand on the faith to a new generation. This is taking place against a cultural background of exaggerated individualism (in the form of Relativism) and a theological climate that tends to identify free will (*liberum arbitrium*) with Christian freedom itself (*Libertas arbitrii*). All of the traditional markers of success in the Catholic educational enterprise over the past twenty years indicate the seriousness of this failure. For Joseph Ratzinger, this analysis is quite accurate; indeed, he stated it more bluntly:

„If we consider the present cultural situation, about which I have tried to give some indications, frankly it must seem to be a miracle that there is still Christian faith despite everything, and not only in the surrogate forms of Hick, Knitter and others, but the complete, serene faith of the New Testament and of the church of all times.”³

Undoubtedly, one might point to the usual range of difficulties facing Catholic education in our contemporary circumstances: the prevailing popular culture for promoting a worldview at odds with Christian teaching on a broad range of issues – sociological, political, economic and spiritual. Yet it is intriguing that a similar set of problems overcame Protestant educational efforts in the nineteenth century, but left Catholic efforts unaffected. This begs the question: what has changed? It would be unwise to claim that any one cause will offer an adequate solution. Nevertheless, it may be argued that it is not only external attacks that lie at the root of the problem; it may include factors that are internal to Catholic Education itself.

This paper will mount a case for this contention in three parts. The first part will demonstrate that the influence on Catholic education of what may be described as a *popularly received* version of the theology of Karl Rahner may have laid a foundation for problems of Catholic identity schools. This general phenomenon is described by the English

² See Bushnell, Horace. *Christian Nurture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1847), p. 25.

³ Ratzinger, Joseph. *Relativism: The Central Problem For Faith Today*. Address to the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America. May 1996.

Dominican, Aidan Nichols, as *vulgarised Rahnerianism*: „an attitude of mind among theologically literate, or at least religiously articulate, Catholics which owed much, certainly, to Rahner but on the way had shed much too in the way of nuance and qualification.”⁴ The key role during the nineteen seventies of new catechetical methodologies, based on a misinterpretation of Catholic teaching on divine revelation, will be used as evidence for this contention. Part two will examine the chronologically parallel influence of *Constructivist* educational philosophies which emphasised *process* over *content*. This will be followed by an analysis of these constructivist philosophies, taken principally from contemporary educational research, which has now exposed their shortcomings. The third part will draw attention to the attempts of some Catholic thinkers to re-define the indicators of effectiveness for the Catholic educational enterprise in order to justify the collapse of what had hitherto been accepted as the objective marks of success will be explored. Further, more radical attempts to redefine what Catholic schools should be attempting, based on the work of Leuven theologians Lieven Boeve and Didier Pollefeyt, will also be noted. Finally, the conclusion will argue that Catholic education now stands at a point of decision regarding whether or not it should continue on this *vulgarised Rahnerian* trajectory, or form a new partnership with sound educational research and retrieve its commitment to a *realist* epistemology.

Part 1

The Impact on Catholic Schools of a „Rahnerian Atmosphere”

To the end of his life, Karl Rahner continued to insist that he was in no way calling into question the settled doctrine of the Church:

„Unlike Hans Küng and such people, I never really wanted to do a theology that called into question the teaching authority of the Church where it bound me unconditionally.”⁵

and again:

„A conservative tendency is certainly perceptible in Rome. That, however, is probably often a result of the fact that some Catholic theologians defend positions that are objectively incompatible with

⁴ Nichols, Aidan „Rahner and Balthasar: Anonymous Christianity in Question” in *Beyond the Blue Glass. Catholic Essays on Faith and Culture. Volume 1*. (London: St Austin Press, 2002), p. 113.

⁵ Rahner, Karl in Paul Imho and Hubert Biallowons (Eds.) *Faith in a Wintry Season: conversations and interviews in the last years of his life*. Trans: Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 52.

the teachings of the Magisterium. Dangers for the continued handing on of the content of the Catholic faith do exist, dangers which are, in part, provoked by so-called progressive Catholic theologians."⁶

Yet while Rahner's speculations are capable of an orthodox interpretation, they are couched in a language of complexity and subtle qualifications not readily accessible to the non-specialist theologian. Many of his views continue to be open to possible misinterpretation and oversimplification, and it was this aspect of his work that may have led to the problems identified by another great theological figure of the late twentieth century. It was Hans Urs von Balthasar who took issue with a comprehensive suite of apparent errors derived from Rahner's theological corpus. These are summarised by Nichols in the following brief terms:

„In fundamental theology, the belief that a transcendental philosophy can anticipate the distinctive content of Christian revelation; in soteriology, the idea that the life, death and resurrection of Christ are exemplary rather than efficacious; in theological ethics the notion that the love of neighbour can be surrogate for the love of God and Christological confession no longer necessary for Christian existence; in the theology of religions the idea that other faiths are ordinary means of salvation alongside the Christian way; in ecclesiology the idea that the Church becomes some Gnadenerfahrung, 'the experience of grace', even without any further intervention of the redeeming God in the special history of revelation."⁷

The celebrated encounter between Balthasar and Rahner around the emblematic issue of *Anonymous Christianity* need not concern us here; whether or not Rahner actually taught those things of which Balthasar accuses him remains difficult to resolve even for the subtlest of commentators.⁸ Nevertheless, Rahner's name was and continues to be regularly invoked in support of some of the very causes that von Balthasar outlined.

⁶ Rahner, *Faith in a Wintry Season: conversations and interviews in the last years of his life*. p. 54.

⁷ Nichols, „Rahner and Balthasar: Anonymous Christianity in Question”, p. 112.

⁸ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, „Current Trends in Catholic Theology and the Responsibility of the Christian: *Communio* 5 (1978), p. 79.

Promoting A Rahnerian Vision

In the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic schools throughout much of the Western world underwent dramatic reorganisation in an attempt to come to terms with the perceived requirements of the Council. This prompted some of these institutions, in what appears to have been a genuine concern for renewal, to adopt processes that reflected and continues to reflect the tenets of *vulgarised Rahnerianism*, and this, arguably, now causes some difficulty for the clarity of their Catholic identity. These so called *Rahnerian* principles may not have been correctly interpreted by those who implemented them, but in this distorted form, they were enacted nevertheless and remain as basic principles or as a kind of *motivating spirit* in many Catholic schools. In some cases, these principles are so entrenched that the traditional markers of success in Catholic education are being re-envisioned to fit more accurately with the values of *vulgarised Rahnerianism*. (Evidence of this process will be provided in Part 3 of this paper.) Historically, it is a relatively simple matter to illustrate the way in which this process worked its way from theory to practice, beginning with Rahner's speculations on Divine Revelation, mediated through lesser theologians in the Catechetical Establishment, and eventually finding their way in ever more diminished forms into actual school environments.

Divine Revelation as the Key

Of all the areas specified by Balthasar as emblematic of *vulgarised Rahner*, the one that has proved foundational for the reorganisation of Catholic schools has been the area of fundamental theology – the way in which Divine Revelation is understood and translated into organisational principles within a school community. All of the other difficulties identified by Balthasar (soteriology, theological ethics, ecclesiology, and theology of religions) are built on this one foundation. The key error by which Divine Revelation can be undermined is, to use Balthasar's phrase: „*The belief that a transcendental philosophy can anticipate the distinctive content of Christian revelation.*”⁹ Rahner's own words would seem to lend support to this approach as being suitable for implementation within Catholic schools. He described himself as being a lover of

⁹ Nichols, Aidan. „*Rahner and Balthasar: Anonymous Christianity in Question*”, p. 112.

speculative theology while simultaneously having an aversion to dogmatic positivism.

*„Personally I have a great aversion to the dogmatic positivism that flourished in Catholic schools during the last century. For example, if you wanted a course on the seven sacraments, you were told to use Denzinger. This was a disease that theology had contracted. Yet, while I detest dogmatic positivism, I am a great lover of speculative theology. That is, a theology that seeks a simple internal principle and through it sees the unity of all dogmatic thought.”*¹⁰

And also...

*„The history of the world, then, means the history of salvation. God's offer of himself, in which God communicates himself absolutely to the whole of mankind is, by definition man's salvation. For it is the fulfilment of man's transcendence in which he transcends toward the absolute God himself.”*¹¹

Rahner drew a distinction between two kinds of divine revelation, the first being described as the transcendental history of salvation and revelation, and the second as the categorical, official history of salvation.¹² For Rahner, the transcendental experience of every human being held considerable significance in the area of divine revelation, to the point where he proposed that...

*„[T]he history of salvation and revelation is coexistent and coextensive with the history of the world and of the human spirit, and hence also with the history of religion. Because there is self-transcendence on man's part through God's ontological and revelatory self-communication, the history of revelation takes place wherever this transcendental history has its history, and hence in the whole history of man.”*¹³

On the other hand, categorical history is subjected to subtle qualifications ...

„First, the categorical history of man as a spiritual subject is always and everywhere the necessary but historical and objectifying

¹⁰ Rahner, Karl in Paul Imho and Hubert Biallowons (Eds.) *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: conversations and interviews 1965-1982*. Trans: Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 17.

¹¹ Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. (New York: Crossroad, 1978), p. 143.

¹² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, p. 153.

¹³ Ibidem.

self-interpretation of the transcendental experience which constitutes the realization of man's essence. Secondly, this realization of man's essence does not take place alongside the events of historical life, but within this historical life."¹⁴

In other words, the general experience of transcendence – the natural interior impression shared by all human beings of *something more than meets the eye* and a yearning for the infinite – is elevated to a level that can seem at least equivalent in importance to the public revelation of God in Christ.

Some began to interpret these speculations as an endorsement of the principle of *ongoing revelation*, which tended to diminish the unique role of Christ – something that Rahner himself had not done. In 1971, when Rahner's theology was clearly in the ascendant in its influence on the Church, the International Catechetical Congress took place in Rome, at which this key speculation of Rahner was promoted by prominent members of the Catechetical establishment. According to Michael Wrenn, who was present at the gathering, one of the major issues debated concerned this very topic – whether or not there were two distinct kinds of revelation in Catholicism. The outcome, at least in the English-speaking language group, was a resolution which found in favour of Rahner's speculations (although Rahner himself was not mentioned), namely:

„...that there were indeed two views of revelation: one that saw it in terms of revealed truths couched in conceptual terms that had to be communicated to students in situations such as classrooms and another view that saw revelation as the self-communication of God, proceeding from what was called an incarnational point of view. This second view, as would soon become clear, conceived of revelation as something to be actually personally experienced."¹⁵

The idea that divine revelation was something *personally experienced* was problematic. It had the potential to make divine revelation captive to subjective experience, discounting the unique role of Christ, and confusing revelation with the personal and individual work of the Holy Spirit. It is quite true that individuals personally experience God – through prayer, for example and even as private revelation as described

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Wrenn, Michael. *Catechisms and Controversies. Religious Education in the Post-conciliar Years*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 103.

in the Catechism.¹⁶ While this is an authentic spiritual experience for the individual, it cannot be described in the same way as what is properly referred to as Christ's definitive revelation.¹⁷ In the terms that they were to be articulated in the period which followed, this understanding of revelation had already been condemned in Pope Pius X's anti-modernist encyclical *Pascendi Domini Gregis* in 1907.¹⁸ Nevertheless, influential figures in the Catechetical Establishment, including the charismatic Indian Jesuit, Duraiswami Amalorpavadass, seemed intent on promoting this notion, clearly inspired by Rahner's speculative theology, but taking it into the area of *ongoing revelation*.¹⁹ This notion of *ongoing revelation* took strong hold among the members of the Catechetical establishment, even to the point where it was argued at the 1971 Catechetical Conference that the recently published *General Catechetical Directory* favoured this principle. This contention, to quote Wrenn's dramatically understated observation *appears not to have been correct, however*.²⁰ An objective examination of this document would have revealed the direct contrary:

„On the other hand, God who formerly spoke to the human race by revealing himself through divine deeds together with the message of the prophets, of Christ, and of the apostles, even now secretly directs, through the Holy Spirit, in sacred tradition by the light and sense of the faith, the Church, his bride, and he speaks with her, so that the People of God, under the leadership of the magisterium, may attain a fuller understanding of revelation.”²¹

An even more authoritative source could be found in Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation – Dei Verbum*, which was just as explicit:

„The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Homebush: St Pauls/ Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 67.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 67, 68.

¹⁸ Pius X, *Pascendi Domini Gregis*, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 14, 28, 39.

¹⁹ See Amalorpavadass, Duraiswami Simon „*Catechesis as a Pastoral Task of the Church*”, in Warren, Michael, ed. *Source Book for Modern Catechetics*. (Winona, MN: St Mary's Press, 1983), p. 348.

²⁰ Wrenn, *Catechisms and Controversies. Religious Education in the Postconciliar Years*, p. 103.

²¹ Sacred Congregations for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory*. (1971) no. 13.

*public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 6:14 and Tit. 2:13)."*²²

Also:

*„It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls."*²³

Gabriel Moran, a De La Salle brother who came to be considered the leader of the Catechetical movement in the English speaking world in the late 1960's and 70's had already taken this notion in a more radical direction as early as 1967, mocking the idea that a profound acquaintance with Christ in the scriptures could be a particularly useful catechetical activity...

*„It is a most remarkable contention in much theological and catechetical writing today that revelation will become relevant to men's lives if only they will study the history of Israel and realise that God revealed himself in the events of Israelite history."*²⁴

By 1972, he had gone even further:

*„Were anyone to start looking for a revelation in the events available as events, that is, in the day-to-day experiences of this life, he would have to reject any document from the past pretending to divine revelation."*²⁵

Much of the substance of Moran's views were clearly drawn from Rahner, whose comments on Salvation history raised the possibility of looking beyond the Biblical record:

„That is not to say that revelation in such essential purity is found only within the realm of the Old and New Testaments. At least in individual salvation history, there are no reasons against but many reasons for saying that in such and such an individual history of salvation and revelation there are moments of history in which the divine origins and the absolute correctness of a self-interpretation

²² *Dei Verbum* (1965) 4.

²³ *Op.cit.* 10.

²⁴ Moran, Gabriel. *Theology of Revelation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), p. 53.

²⁵ Moran, *Theology of Revelation*, p. 33.

of the transcendental experience of God become manifest and achieve certainty about themselves."²⁶

Moran, lacking Rahner's subtly and careful qualifications, was still able to use terms that appeared to be those of the master theologian, and made far more bold assertions for his audience in Catholic schools. He described revelation in the following terms: *'[Revelation is] the underlying reality which gives sense to faith as an open-ended search.'*²⁷ And further... „*Revelation is the structure of all experience and faith is an element or basic component of the revelational process.*"²⁸

Reorganising Catholic Schools

The new catechetical approach adopted by the 1971 International Catechetical Conference affected Catholic schools around the world, and its effects began to be felt immediately. While a multitude of examples could be quoted from around the world, a representative example can be found in the writings of British author and former Catholic school headmistress, Daphne McLeod, who has documented many of the changes in her book, *Will Your Grandchildren Be Catholic?*²⁹ McLeod tells of her experiences at Corpus Christi College of Religious Education in Kensington, London, in which presenters at this institute engaged in 'subtly undermining belief in the Divinity of Christ, the authority of His Church to teach and even the reliability of Divine Revelation.'³⁰ These doctrinal views appear to be an exact fit for *vulgarised Rahnerianism*, and provide a plausible explanation for the approach Catholic schools adopted from this time, and which began to be widespread thereafter. The de-emphasising of doctrinal content in apparent conformity with the ideas of Rahner was achieved very quickly and was pervasive. By as early as 1979, the problems of this approach were identified at the highest official level – by Pope John Paul II himself in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* in which he frankly acknowledged problems in the catechetical practices of the Church of exactly this kind.

²⁶ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, p. 156.

²⁷ Moran, Gabriel *The Present Revelation*. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 43.

²⁸ See Moran, *The Present Revelation*, p. 45.

²⁹ See McLeod, Daphne. *Will Your Grandchildren Be Catholic?* (Great Bookham: Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice, 2007).

³⁰ Daphne. *Will Your Grandchildren Be Catholic?*, p. 21.

„In certain places, the desire to find the best forms of expression or to keep up with fashions in pedagogical methods has often enough resulted in certain catechetical works which bewilder the young and even adults, either by deliberately or unconsciously omitting elements essential to the Church's faith, or by attributing excessive importance to certain themes at the expense of others, or, chiefly, by a rather horizontalist overall view out of keeping with the teaching of the Church's magisterium.”³¹

In place of the simplified doctrine (perhaps badly expressed in arid propositions), students were asked to focus on their own experiences in order to find underlying principles to guide their religious practice. This proved to be enormously time-consuming and open-ended. One of the most widespread catechetical methodologies was based on the work of D.S. Amalorpvadas, who had been so influential at the 1971 Rome Conference. Essentially, this involved three distinct movements:

- „1. Evocation of the human experience, reflection on it and interpretation of its significance at the human level.*
- 2. Interpretation and discovery of its fuller meaning and ultimate fulfilment in the light of God's Word proclaimed.*
- 3. With the discovery of the relevance of the Word to life, reviewing and re-living the human experience in full consonance with faith.”³²*

Another popular approach that focused on individual experience was developed by Thomas Groome, the *shared praxis* methodology:

„[Shared Praxis is] a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their socio-cultural reality ... [they] have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate in community with the creative intent of reviewed praxis in Christian faith towards God's reign for all creation.”³³

A great deal of analysis regarding the theological and philosophical suitability of these methodologies has already taken place and need not be repeated here. One significant problem with both of these, however, has not yet received a great deal of attention: namely, their failure

³¹ John Paul II. *Catechesis Tradendae* (1979) No 49.

³² Amalorpavadass, Duraiswami Simon, „*Theology of Catechesis*”, Keynote address delivered at the World Congress of Catechetics. Rome, 1971.

³³ Groome, T. *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980) p. 135.

to act in accordance with what is known about human cognitive architecture. (This aspect will be addressed more fully in the next section.) In following either process, nothing overtly contrary to the Catholic doctrine would necessarily be presented. For this reason, local Episcopal authorities could have meticulously examined various catechetical programmes and found in them nothing contrary to Catholic teaching. This scrupulously fair, minimalist approach, whereby catechetical materials were scanned for *errors* could legitimately conclude that in most cases, no explicit error existed. Had the process been viewed from another lens – *does this programme provide an integral presentation of Catholic teaching?* – the conclusion may well have been different.³⁴ The real problem lay in the fact that the time required to move through the stages of these methodologies actually prevented students from ever arriving at a basic but broadly comprehensive understanding of their Catholic faith and heritage.

Part 1. Conclusions

A soundly based theology of Revelation, one which is in accordance with the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is indispensable for the development of Religious Education in Catholic schools. The remaining errors associated with a theology of *ongoing revelation* must be addressed. The tenets of *vulgarised Rahnerianism* also need to be examined and modified to re-establish an authentic Catholic doctrinal identity at every level. It must be conceded, however, that pre-conciliar catechetical practice was deficient in its theoretical basis and depended heavily on the personal contribution of the catechist or teacher to appropriately *enliven* the presentation by means of personal witness. It certainly did not reflect the perspectives that were to be articulated in *Dei Verbum* and was in need of renewal. Excellent examples of how this might have been achieved already existed and have continued to develop, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to present these alternatives in detail on this occasion.³⁵

³⁴ Eventually, after the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this question of the integrity of Catholic doctrine is exactly the one that was posed by US Bishops. In setting up the Office of the Catechism, they provided protocols by which Catechetical Programmes were to be assessed not on the presence or absence of errors, but on whether or not they presented an integral account of Catholic doctrine.

³⁵ For example, the Montessori-based „Catechesis of the Good Shepherd” devised by Dr Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi embraces the full understanding and insights of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the understanding of Divine Revelation found

Part 2

The Impact of Contemporary Educational Philosophies

It must be noted that the rejection of a settled, systematic content was not solely the fate of religious education during this period. The dominance of *process* over *content* was reflected in prevailing educational philosophies, too. What was different in this instance was that Catholic Schools made no attempt to subject these prevailing educational trends to serious analytical scrutiny. During the nineteenth century crisis affecting Protestant educational efforts described by Bushnell in the introduction to this paper, Catholic schools maintained their identity in the face of challenges from subjectivism and individualism. In the 1960's, it appears that Catholic schools, following the lead set for them by the change in Catechetical methodology, simply followed the educational trajectory set by parallel currents in modern educational theories. In so doing, they failed not only themselves but the culture as well.

In 2006, a groundbreaking paper by the prominent educationalists Kirschner, Sweller and Clark provided detailed reasons for the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential and inquiry-based teaching of the kind that began in the 1960's and continues to the present. They demonstrated that evidence regarding the nature of human cognitive architecture and empirical studies over the past half century indicate that students need strong guidance in foundational concepts until they have attained a sufficiently high prior knowledge to provide internal guidance.³⁶ As noted by Kirschner *et.al.*, a learning methodology

in *Dei Verbum*. It also has the advantage of resting on the foundation of Thomist epistemology and implicitly acknowledges the role of a participatory metaphysics. Finally, the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd approach stands up to the scrutiny of modern educational research as described in the works of Lillard and Hattie. All of these matters will be explored more fully in a paper dedicated to this topic which is now in preparation. For reference, see: Cavaletti, Sofia *The Religious Potential of the Child 6-12 Years Old*. Trans: Rebekah Rojceicz and Alan R. Perry. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications (2002); Lillard, Angeline Stoll. *Montessori. The Science Behind the Genius*. New York: Oxford University Press (2007); Cavaletti, Sofia. *Living Liturgy: Elementary Reflections*. Trans: Patricia Coulter. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998); Cavaletti, S, Coulter, P, Montanaro, S, Gobbi, G, *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1996); Cavaletti, Sofia, *History's Golden Thread*. Trans: Rebekah Rojceicz. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999).

³⁶ See Kirschner, P. S., Sweller, J., and Clark, R. E. in *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 2006, p. 75-86.

that involves students in open-ended discovery methodologies places heavy demands on novice learners because it requires them to search for relevant information in a very large „*problem space*” – perhaps accurately described as looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

„Furthermore, that working memory load does not contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in long-term memory because while working memory is being used to search for problem solutions, it is not available and cannot be used to learn. The consequences of requiring novice learners to search for problem solutions using a limited working memory or the mechanisms by which unguided or minimally guided instruction might facilitate change in long-term memory appear to be routinely ignored.”³⁷

In other words, even while these essentially unsound educational methods were taking hold in educational circles from the 1970s, evidence was already starting to indicate that they would fail. The adoption within Catholic school systems of catechetical methodologies that used broadly similar processes ensured that these unsound practices would have an even longer life. There would be no challenge coming from what ought to have been a superior Catholic educational model such as the one pioneered by Maria Montessori, which requires a realist epistemology and a teleological metaphysics.³⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explain these terms, essentially, it means that a genuinely Catholic educational theory must be based on an acknowledgment that human beings live in an intelligible universe and that students are capable of discovering the meanings that are inherent in the material creation itself (realist epistemology). The discoveries made by people of previous generations can be passed on as a body of knowledge, or a tradition so that contemporary students are freed from the need to cover the same ground. They may then devote their creative inquiries either to affirming the validity of what has been passed on or examining aspects of reality that have not yet been fully explored. Montessori’s method is

³⁷ Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark, *Educational Psychologist*, p. 77.

³⁸ For contemporary assessment of the value of the Montessori method, see Lillard, Angeline Stoll. *Montessori. The Science Behind the Genius*. New York: Oxford University Press (2007). See also the more recent developments in Religious Education based on the Montessori method developed by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi in: Cavalletti, Sofia *The Religious Potential of the Child 6-12 Years Old*. Trans: Rebekah Rojceicz and Alan R. Perry. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2002). See also Gobbi, Gianna, *Listening To God With Children* (Loveland, Ohio: Treehaus Communications, 1998).

directed mainly at novice learners – children from infancy onwards. It typically involves presenting a narrowed field of pre-determined materials which have been structured in such a way that learners are able to put together the pieces of relevant information for themselves. They are not hindered in this process by being exposed to irrelevant, non-essential pieces of information. Hence, students are exposed to an essential *basic content* while still exercising the human need to put together the meaning personally. In terms of religious education, this method ensures that learners are exposed to the Tradition of the Church, while continuing to reflect on its meaning personally. It also presumes that the universe was created with a meaning and a discoverable purpose by a benign and loving God, and that human beings have a place in the divine plan (teleological metaphysics).³⁹

More recently, the evidence from the meta-studies of Professor John Hattie – now one of the most frequently cited educational authorities in the world – has confirmed the findings of Kirschner, Sweller and Clark as well as the many who preceded them. Basing his work on comprehensive reviews and comparisons of the relevant educational research (meta-studies), Hattie has graded the usefulness of various teaching techniques according to their *effect size*. This is an annual benchmark of improvement in which a score of approximately 0.4 is designated as average. The effect size for the typical methodologies employed after the Council do not score well. The *inductive approach* comes in at 0.33, while *inquiry based teaching* is rated at 0.31 – in other words, both methodologies produce below average results.⁴⁰

The Educational Philosophy of Constructivism

These unstructured *open-ended* techniques fall under the broad banner described in Educational literature as Constructivism. *Radical Constructivism*, in the form described by Ernst von Glasersfeld, is the purest form of this philosophy. It holds that knowledge is entirely subjective and there is no inherent intelligibility in the external world. When considered in philosophical terms, Constructivism must be viewed essentially as an anti-realist epistemology. It argues that beliefs and perceptions regarding the world are merely human constructs; knowledge is

³⁹ A more comprehensive exposition of these themes will form part of a paper currently in preparation.

⁴⁰ Hattie, John. *Visible Learning. A Synthesis Of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating To Achievement*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 299.

constructed, not discovered. This position is consistent with the Post-modern theories of Richard Rorty, whose view is that „...*we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.*”⁴¹ In summarising the literature on the subject of *Constructivism*, Hattie observes:

„*The role of the constructivist teacher is claimed to be more of facilitation to provide opportunities for individual students to acquire knowledge and construct meaning through their own activities and through discussion, reflection and the sharing of ideas with other learners with minimal corrective intervention (Cambridge, 2003; Daniels, 2001; Selley, 1999; von Glaserfeld, 1995). These kinds of statements are almost directly opposite to the successful recipe for teaching and learning.*”⁴²

Hattie then goes on to offer some personal observations, which can be echoed by many who have worked in the field of education over the past thirty years and have witnessed the pervasive hold of Constructivism on the educational establishment during that time:

„*Every year I present lectures to teacher education students and find that they are already indoctrinated with the mantra constructivism good, direct instruction bad. When I show them the results of the meta-analyses, they are stunned and they often become angry at having been given an agreed set of truths and commandments against direct instruction.*”⁴³

By *direct instruction*, Hattie does not mean the kind of didactic teaching whereby all learning is directed from the front of a class by a teacher reading from a text book. Such a caricature of good teaching, which many have had the misfortune to experience first-hand, can often be used to denigrate alternatives to constructivist methodologies. By *direct instruction* Hattie is drawing attention to a method outlined by Adams and Engelmann in 1996.⁴⁴ This involves seven steps:

1. Having clear learning intentions before the lesson begins.
2. Knowing the success criteria to which the students will be held accountable afterwards.
3. Building commitment and engagement towards the learning task.

⁴¹ Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 170.

⁴² Hattie, John. *Visible Learning*, p. 26.

⁴³ Op. cit., p. 204.

⁴⁴ See Adams, G. L., & Engelmann, S. *Research on direct instruction: 20 years beyond DISTAR*. (Seattle WA: Educational Achievement Systems. 1996).

4. Guidance to the teacher regarding the best way to present the learning material.
5. Guided practice, whereby students can work with a competent guide as they practice their new learning.
6. Closure, whereby the students understand the point at which the instruction in new learning has ended, so that they can begin integrating it into their existing cognitive framework.
7. Time for independent practice.⁴⁵

If one were to apply the approach of these most recent educational theorists to the Religious Education field, one would have to come to the conclusion that school students, as inexpert learners, would benefit from a structured approach rather than the inductive, open ended methodology. This should not be interpreted, by way of caricature, as a return to the worst features of a didactic model. A basic understanding of settled doctrine needs to precede speculative theological understandings in order to fulfil the requirements of the very first step of good *direct instruction* – having clear intentions before the lesson begins. The remaining stages of a sound presentation according to this methodology would then proceed according to a *concrete to abstract* sequence, supported at every stage by competent guidance as required in the directed teaching model. It may perhaps be argued that it is not appropriate to apply such an *educational model* to education in faith, and this is indeed a valid concern. Nevertheless, it can be clearly demonstrated that this methodology is not only sound educationally, but also fits very well with the *faith education* recommendations of St Augustine,⁴⁶ St Thomas Aquinas,⁴⁷ Maria Montessori, and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, as devised by Sofia Cavalletti.⁴⁸ In any case, it is obvious that school students should understand a basic and comprehensive content before they can competently deal with contemplating the meaning of their own complex experiences or the speculative frontiers of theology.

⁴⁵ Summarised from Hattie, John. *Visible Learning*, p. 205-6.

⁴⁶ See St Augustine, *Catechising the Uninstructed*, Chapter 3, Paragraph 5. (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2005).

⁴⁷ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. (Westminster MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I, 77-83.

⁴⁸ See Lillard, Angeline Stoll, *Montessori. The Science Behind the Genius*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Cavalletti, Sofia. *The Religious Potential of the Child, 6-12 Years Old*. Trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz and Alan R. Perry. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2008).

Part 2. Conclusions

The Catholic educational tradition, based on a realist epistemology, has a great deal to offer in the general field of education. There will always be dangers involved in following educational philosophies such as Constructivism, which, in some of its forms, can undermine the objective nature of reality and truth itself, laying the foundation for Relativism. Nevertheless, there are other currents in contemporary educational research which offer valuable insights. Fruitful cooperation with such research can only contribute to the strengthening of the Catholic educational enterprise.

Part 3

Re-Defining the Markers of Success

While it is entirely appropriate for a profound theologian such as Rahner to speculate and “push the boundaries of thought” in his field, it is most unhelpful to encourage non-specialists to take this same line. The idea of presenting the latest findings of speculative theology in Catholic secondary (and even primary) schools runs the risk of spreading confusion rather than enhancing educational attainment or furthering the goals of religious formation. In the absence of a sound knowledge of the received doctrines of the Church, teachers (and their students) may well fail to distinguish the speculations from actual Church teaching. This appears to have been the case in many schools for over four decades. The following vision and mission statement is an indicative example of a formulation, whose *vulgarised Rahnerian* perspective is quite clear. It may be observed that there is nothing in this document that is contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church. The question to be asked, rather, is whether there is anything stated here that establishes a Catholic identity as it has been traditionally understood. Could these statements be accepted in good conscience by atheists or agnostics?

„Vision

Education leads to life.

I come that they may have life, and life to the full. John 10:10

Mission

Presentation College Windsor is a Catholic girls school founded in 1873. The College is guided by the mission of the Presentation Sisters and inspired by the faith and courage of their founder, Nano Nagle. PCW draws on its rich history and tradition of excellence, adventure, welcome and justice to offer the life giving-benefits of education to all in our community and to prepare young

women to take their place in the world and to live with integrity, confidence and compassion.

As many we grow

Together we strive

As one with God we succeed

We Value

Learning: All members of the community are learners in an environment which promotes: Excellence. Joy. Reflection. Hope. Creativity. Independent and Critical thinking.

Take my yoke upon and learn from me ... and you will find rest in your souls. Matthew 11:29

Community: The school is shaped by its community, local and global, and this is expressed by: Celebration. Hospitality. Responsibility. Action. Diversity. Inclusion.

For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them. Mt 18:19

Relationships: Positive relationships which support learning and life are built and sustained through: Tolerance. Warmth. Trust. Honesty. Respect.

Collegiality.

*Love one another as I have loved you. John 15:12*⁴⁹

When students of the same school were given the opportunity of articulating their own vision, they reinforced the impression created by the vision statement...

„We believe in our community.

Working as one we have the foundation and support to reach our full potential as young women facing the future.

Within our sanctuary we belong.

With any hardship comes the opportunity to unite and learn, which builds our spirit and our will to achieve.

Through acceptance and trust our confidence grows.

We encourage everyone to create their own unique character, develop the mind, body and spirit through equality, friendship and generosity.

We embrace all people different from ourselves.

⁴⁹ <http://www.pcw.vic.edu.au/Our%20School/visionmission.aspx> Accessed 21st June, 2011.

We seek to be socially aware and just.
 We are dedicated to academic excellence.
 These elements shape our character, values and faith,
 and lead us along the pathways of life.
 As many we grow. Together we strive. As one we succeed.
formulated by representative students."⁵⁰

After a generation of this implicit Raherian vision, statistics referring to participation of young people in Catholic life point to a collapse in the traditional markers of that life: Mass attendance, participation in the other Sacraments, prayer and devotional life of the Church, acceptance of Catholic doctrines, adherence to Catholic moral teaching and support for Catholic charitable works. Many in the Catholic education establishment now appear to be involved in an attempt to re-define the markers of success for Catholic education in order to reflect the current outcomes. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this phenomenon, as the studies are widely available and well documented in journals of Religious Education and internet sites. Margaret Freund, citing former Catholic priest, Paul Collins, claims that:

„The old religious certainties have become a thing of the past, and Australian Catholics are less concerned with religious participation and observance (Collins 1991). .. Paul Collins argues [that] more and more Australian Catholics describe themselves as ‘cultural Catholics’. That is, they maintain an understanding of themselves as Catholic but are perhaps alienated from various church teachings on contraception divorce or homosexuality, and are not involved in Catholic practice. As Dixon pointed out only 18-19% of Australian Catholics take part in the parish system or could be described as regular Mass goers."⁵¹

Research from Dr. Denis McLaughlin confirms what a wide variety of other studies have found regarding young Catholics:

„The major conclusion that this study generates is to confirm a trend identified by other research (Hewitt, 1978; Flynn, 1993; Angelico, 1997), that young Australian Catholics are becoming in-

⁵⁰ Student Mission Statement described on the website of Presentation College, Windsor <http://www.pcw.melb.catholic.edu.au/his3.htm> . (accessed July 6, 2009).

⁵¹ Freund, Margaret. *They Hear All About It Around The Traps. Catholic Ethos And School Choice*. Paper Presented At The Annual Conference Of The Australian Association For Research In Education. December 2001. Notre Dame University, Fremantle.

creasingly independent of the institutional Church as a guide for their lives."⁵²

Far from sounding an alarm about the declining rates of belief and practice among young people and those charged with the Church's educational mission, this author focused on *positives*, as is evidenced by the following sample comment, citing a variety of supporting studies:

„This research confirms a trend identified in other research (Hewitt, 1978), that increasingly, young ... Catholics are becoming „communal Catholics.” They are „loyal to the Catholic collectivity and sympathetic toward its heritage” (Ludwig, 1995, p.40), but refuse unilaterally to acknowledge the authority of institutional Church leadership (Greeley, 1978, p. 272). This evolving „selective” approach of affiliation with Catholicism is not a cynical response. Along with it is an eschewing of the hypocritical and a yearning for increased authenticity (Flynn, 1993), „a desire for new religious forms... which provide personalised experiences of community”, (Colman, 1982, p.178) as well as an increased involvement in social justice issues. (Goosen, 1990; Neidhart & Hansford,1988).”⁵³

Another comment by Angelico is indicative of the criteria that many Catholic schools would prefer to be judged against, because it is the one based on the kind of vision out of which they appear to be operating:

„Many young people value the welcoming, friendly and personalised atmosphere. They value the care, support, understanding and assistance they receive from their teachers and peers, and the individualised help they receive with their learning. Some students also note that they get help with life and living issues. The Catholic school is therefore more than an educational institution. For many students, the school is a big family. It's a place of belonging, it's a place where you develop life long bonds and intimate and fulfilling relationships; it's a place which provides security and protection from threats in the broad society, such as drugs and crime; it's a place which provides parameters for life and living; finally, it's a

⁵² McLaughlin, D *The Beliefs, Values and Practices of Student Teachers at the Australian Catholic University*. (Brisbane: Australian Catholic University, Research Report. 1999), p. 31.

⁵³ McLaughlin, D *The Beliefs, Values and Practices of Student Teachers at the Australian Catholic University*, p. 32.

place which connects them with a broader community and their religious heritage and identity."⁵⁴

It must be conceded that social concern and warm relationships should play their part in any properly functioning Christian community. But the notion that Catholics can be free to select the parts of Church teaching that suit them and discard those that they dislike strikes at the heart of Catholic claims that their religion is divinely inspired and offers a range of supernatural means for achieving its end. There is evidence here that the value of grace as a distinct supernatural reality is, in practical terms, discounted. It is simply part of the general human landscape and does not appear to be particularly valued. The foremost difficulty in this view is the place accorded to the transformation effected by the sacrament of Baptism, wherein the individual receives the life of Christ, expressed in terms of the infused virtues, as articulated by traditional Catholicism and described in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁵⁵ If this anthropological reality is not accepted, then baptised students will not be regarded as transformed individuals capable of receiving Catholic teaching by means of the supernatural virtue of faith. Consequently, alternative methods of religious education must be devised for them which reflect this anthropological perspective – a perspective which is clearly deficient in terms of official Catholic teaching.

Further Radicalisation... Re-Contextualisation? Boeve and Pollefeyt

If students are not going to be transformed by the grace of God through their baptism so that they are interiorly capable of receiving supernatural truth, what then should be the subject matter of religious education? There are a number of contemporary answers already gaining currency in schools. Some Catholic educators have adopted *critical thinking* as the substance of a new Catholic identity. Among the more prominent theorists of this approach is Lieven Boeve, professor of fundamental theology at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He proposes a process of *re-contextualisation* by which the Church is advised to adapt the presentation of its message to contemporary circumstances, and accept that its own narrative is valuable only to Christians.

„In the post-modern context, Christianity as a master narrative has also lost much of its credibility – in spite of the fact that many

⁵⁴ Angelico, Teresa, *Taking stock: Revisioning the church in higher education*. (Canberra: National Catholic Education Commission, 1997), p. 46.

⁵⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1266, 1803-1828.

see the fall of the modern master narrative as an opportunity for narrating a new Christian master narrative. Christianity, however, has no future as an all-encompassing meta-narrative, but only as a small narrative, or better still as an open narrative, as a narrative that offers orientation and integration without thereby being determined to integrate everything in its own narrative in a totalitarian way."⁵⁶

Boeve's appeal to adapt the presentation of the Christian message to the pluralist context of contemporary culture is a laudable and necessary task. But Christianity cannot draw back from its claim to be an *all-encompassing* narrative. This is the mission given to it by Christ on the Mount of Olives, when he commissioned his disciples to go forth into the pluralistic society of the Roman Empire and the world beyond it, impressing on them the comprehensiveness of their task: „*Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation. He who believes and is baptised will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned.*"⁵⁷ One might also compare Boeve's position with that of Pope Benedict XVI, writing as Cardinal Ratzinger:

„[T]he Church knows only one tradition: the tradition of Jesus, who lives his life from the Father and who receives himself from the Father and continually gives himself back to the Father. From this perspective, the Church is... critical of all other traditions, for it is from this perspective that the phenomenon known as 'original sin' – that is, the anti-human element of all traditions – makes itself known not just as a statistical but also as a fundamental fact."⁵⁸

Boeve's insights also stand in sharp contrast with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*: „*The sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic,... subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are to be found outside its visible confines.*"⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Boeve, Lieven. *Interrupting Tradition*. Trans. Brian Doyle. (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003), p. 175.

⁵⁷ Mark 16, 15-16.

⁵⁸ Ratzinger, Joseph. *Principles of Catholic Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 93.

⁵⁹ *Lumen Gentium*. 8.

While the official teaching of the Church accepts that there can be found elements of the truth in other *narratives*, there is an insistence that the mission of the Church itself is universal, and that... 'all salvation comes from Christ through the Church.'⁶⁰

Applying the Re-Contextualised Vision to Catholic Schools

One proponent of Boeve's *recontextualising* views in the educational field is his Leuven colleague, Didier Pollefeyt, who defines the aim of Catholic education thus:

„The end product of Catholic education is ... a pupil who is able to inquire [into] everything and everyone positively and with an open mind, inspired by a profound sense of humanity and by a connection with old and new stories which can open alternative worlds which can grant the future a utopian orientation (= the promised land, Kingdom of God).”⁶¹

In the context of a pluralist society, the Catholic student is being asked to surrender the Catholic claim expressed by Christ that *„No one comes to the Father except through me.”*⁶² By this account, the Catholic mind is not one that seeks to establish certitudes through investigation into established Catholic truths. Rather, it is one that remains continually open to *possibilities*. Such a mind does not regard itself as being the recipient of a supernatural faith enabling it to believe. Pollefeyt's Catholic pupil has only an open mind, an understanding of his or her own humanity and a connection with old and new stories. It appears that this definition simply provides an accurate image of a rational human being of no particular religious persuasion.

Pollefeyt proposes a classification of believers into four essential types:

Literal Believer	Externally Critical (Atheistic)
Post-Critical Believer	Relativist Believer

⁶⁰ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 836-856.

⁶¹ Pollefeyt, Didier. *Towards a Contemporary Identity for the Catholic School. Principals & Parish Priests Meeting at Flemington, Melbourne. Australia. Tuesday, September 5, 2006 (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, 2006) quoted in Learning Centred Schools, A Sacred Landscape. A Learning and Teaching Framework for the Archdiocese of Melbourne.* (2009), p. 5.

http://www.asacredlandscape.catholic.edu.au/framework-strategy/_pdf/CEOM-Framework-20pp.pdf Accessed 4th July, 2011.

⁶² John 14, 6

This *Post-critical belief scale* is based on an empirical instrument originally proposed in the 1990s by Dirk Hutsebaut, a Leuven psychologist of religion.⁶³ The two categories that are designated for classifying Christian belief do not appear to be capable of embracing the sophisticated variations that actually occur in this area and would on this basis alone seem to be of very limited value. In order to ensure fairness of the descriptors, it will be necessary to quote directly at some length.

The literal believer (defined as „orthodox”) is described thus:

*„Orthodoxy or ‘literal belief’ stands for a literal affirmation of doctrinal belief contents. Theologically speaking, this religious attitude assumes a direct, immediate access to the transcendent reality. The literally believing human being stresses the possibility and the desirability to present God unmediated, to meet Him directly in words and rituals. He believes in a personal, immutable God and in fixed religious truth claims.”*⁶⁴

Post-critical belief, on the other hand, is presented in these terms:

*„Post-critical Belief stands for a symbolic affirmation of faith contents. It is characterised by faith in a transcendent God and in a religious interpretation of reality in which the transcendent is not considered literally present but is represented symbolically. God is the radical ‘other’ to whom we relate through a symbolic representation, through the interpretation of a sign that refers to the transcendent. People relate to the transcendent reality through mediations only: through stories, rituals, traditions, institutions, churches, ministries, communities and so forth. Faith is acquired through the active, creative and interpretative handling of these mediations... At its worst, this belief style can slide into a religious attitude that has a very general and unspecified content without a clear point of reference, in which any interpretation remains possible.”*⁶⁵

⁶³ See Hutsebaut, D. „Post-critical belief. A new approach to the religious attitude problem. *Journal of Empirical Theology* 9, no. 2, 1996), p. 48-66.

⁶⁴ Pollefeyt, Didier, and Bouwens, Jan, „Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an educational institute.” *International Studies in Catholic Education. Vol. 2, No. 2, October 2010*, p.195.

⁶⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, „Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an educational institute.”, p. 197.

This stance raises difficult questions for a post-critical believer who is also a Catholic. For example, if the *transcendent* is not considered literally present, how does such a believer view the sacramental presence of Christ, particularly in the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist? Furthermore, if faith is „*acquired through the active, creative and interpretative handling of these mediations*”, what is the role for the infused theological virtue of faith? If faith is not conferred as a free and undeserved gift, does not this imply adherence to a variant of Semi-Pelagianism? Yet it would be a mistake to classify this stance of post-critical belief as entirely rationalist and empirical, whereby the material evidence alone determines the parameters of belief. Rather, it is a position where all claims appear to be subservient to the subjective judgement of the individual, and not beholden to the definitive judgement of any external authority whatsoever. For the idea of a post-critical faith „*refers to a well-considered faith in God despite reasons not to believe.*”⁶⁶ The post-critical believer has the freedom to adopt an eclectic mix of whatever it is that appeals from all possible sources, including those that are not apparently compatible with what has been traditionally understood as Christian belief. These belief styles „*are not mutually exclusive; they do not need to exclude each other in practice. The same person can show features of several faith attitudes, depending on the subject, the point of time, or the situation.*”⁶⁷ Pollefeyt identifies the post-critical believer as the most desirable for teaching in Catholic schools, and the goal to which contemporary Catholics should aspire.

„*We openly acknowledge that the Post-critical Belief type is the faith style promoted at the Centre for Academic Teacher Training of our Faculty of Theology (Lombaerts and Pollefeyt 2004).*”⁶⁸ *Based on theological arguments and on empirical research results, we defend that a symbolic style of faith is the most fruitful for the development of the identity of Catholic schools in a pluralising society, today and tomorrow (Pollefeyt 2009).*”⁶⁹ *To promote Post-critical Belief attitude among youth is the intention of the current*

⁶⁶ Ibidem.

⁶⁷ Op. cit., p. 198.

⁶⁸ See Lombaerts, Herman and Pollefeyt, Didier *Hermeneutics and religious education*. Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium (BELT) 180. (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, Moyaert, M., and Didier Pollefeyt, 2004) De pedagogie tussen maakbaarheid en verbeelding. *Etische Perspectieven* 14:87-93.

⁶⁹ Pollefeyt, D. Hoe aan onze (klein) kinderen uitleggen dat Sinterklaas (niet) bestaat. Over levensbeschouwelijke en religieuze maturiteit. (2009) *H-igelijn* 17 no. 1:31-5

course curriculum of religious education in Flemish schools as well."⁷⁰

The effect of Pollefeyt's classifications is to caricature *literal believers* as simplistic and out-dated in clinging to their concrete certitudes. This contrasts with the views of von Balthasar, who may, possibly, accuse Pollefeyt's post-critical believers of falling into the *Enlightenment trap* of reducing all things to disembodied principles or symbols, and making these principles/symbols into the *real* truth. Balthasar insists that for human beings, concrete reality is an inseparable part of reality itself.⁷¹ Any *re-contextualising* must be based on Christ as the *concrete* universal, to whom the Christian *narrative* gives access. While Balthasar would accept that there is meaning which must be sought beyond the concrete and literal, the truth about Christ must begin from and retain contact with the actual events and words, since these are essential for allowing human beings to understand the real meaning. It is a *concrete* Christ that human beings must encounter, and the normal means by which this is mediated in the post-Resurrection period, starting from the breaking of bread at Emmaus, remain both concrete and spiritual – the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Balthasar's view is not just the uncritical acceptance of an unsophisticated person; indeed, he was widely regarded as being among the most cultured human beings of his generation... but Pollefeyt would have no choice but to categorise him as, primarily, a literal believer.

The following diagrams, taken directly from one of Pollefeyt's presentations, make clear his views regarding the identity of Catholic schools.

Figure A: „The Monologue School”

⁷⁰ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, „Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an educational institute”, p. 197.

⁷¹ See: von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*, (London: Burns Oates, 1968), p. 11-42. See also: Chapp, Larry. „Revelation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* Eds. Edward T. Oakes SJ and D. Moss. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2005), p. 19-23.

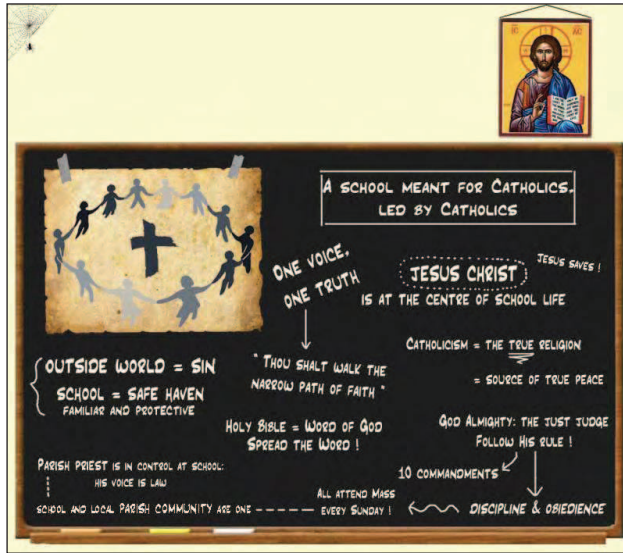


Figure B.

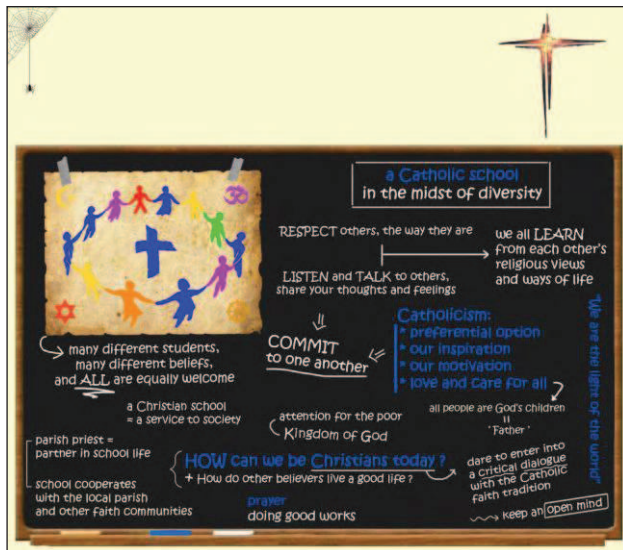


Figure A.⁷²

This appears to caricature those Catholic schools that are attempting to maintain a specific Catholic identity in the traditional sense. Even

⁷² Pollefeyt, Didier. (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, 2010) *Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project. Catholic School Identity in a diversifying culture. Meeting with parish priests and principals from schools across Victoria, Thursday 26 August, 2010.* Slide 58.

http://web.cecv.catholic.edu.au/projects/identity/ECSIP_August_2010_visit.pdf accessed 1st July, 2011.

the choice of title *The Monologue School* conveys the impression of an inadequate engagement with the culture. It includes emotive statements such as: ‘God Almighty: The Just One. Follow this rule!...Thou shalt walk in the narrow path of faith... The parish priest is in control at school: his voice is law.’ The choice of a distinctive icon focusing on the figure of Christ with an open book is perhaps intended to convey the notion that this model of Catholic education can be portrayed as dogmatic and anti-intellectual. There is a specific content, revealed by Christ and holding a privileged place – a *deposit of faith* to be passed on and accepted in faith as *true*. This impression is reinforced with the words: ‘„God Almighty, the just judge... Follow the Rule!... 10 Commandments... Discipline and Obedience.’ *The failure to present a nuanced assessment of this model appears to be intentional. Indeed, it fits very well with Pollefeyt’s stated objective of enhancing the identity of Catholic schools ‘by means of practical theological instruments promoting post-critical belief and a recontextualisation of Catholic school identity in a pluralising cultural context.’*⁷³

Figure B.⁷⁴

This has been presented vibrantly and attractively, creating the impression of contemporary relevance. (In the original, the logo in the top left corner of Figure B is in full colour, while in figure A, this is restricted to shades of grey and dull beige.) Once again, the use of emotive phrases evokes particular kind of desired response: ‘„Respect others the way they are... Parish priest = partner in school life... How can we be Christians today? Dare to enter into critical dialogue with the Catholic faith tradition.”’ The choice of logo vaguely recalls the broad Christian tradition, but without making any specific claims.

This presentation from Pollefeyt is such that the alternatives are put forward as stark choices, with the first alternative shown in a hard edged, almost Jansenist light, with no attempt to convey the subtleties inherent in such a model. The second alternative is described in artificially glowing terms. This style of argument is reminiscent of the highly subjective expositions from the catechetical experts of the nineteen seventies, recalled in the first part of this paper. Such an impression is reinforced when reading Pollefeyt’s analysis of the *empirical research* con-

⁷³ Pollefeyt, *Enhancing Catholic School Identity Project. Catholic School Identity in a diversifying culture. Slide 58.*

⁷⁴ Op. cit. Slide 59.

ducted around these topics. While the data itself may be objective, the analysis appears to be far otherwise. Pollefeyt articulates two subpositions within the *Dialogue School* model. One of these positions, which he calls the *Recontextualising Variant* holds no surprises in terms of the definition he has proposed:

*„In dealing with our Catholic faith, while living in a multi-religious society, we must adopt an open, searching, hermeneutical approach. For the truth of Christianity isn't fixed, but is to be rediscovered and made real through a continuous search for it. We should look creatively and with an open mind for renewed insights in what it could mean to be Catholic in the midst of contemporary culture. For in every new historical context, the Catholic faith is to be re-profiled – recontextualized.”*⁷⁵

The other variant he described, however, seems to be significantly different from the first, and yet he classifies it as a variant of the same model of a „Dialogue School”. This one is called the *Kerygmatic Variant*, and is expressed in these terms:

*„The Catholic faith presents a very meaningful and valuable message that should be heard by all. Ultimately, we believe that the truth offered by Catholicism is more fundamental and fulfilling than the views of other religions or philosophies of life. So, ultimately, a Catholic school may give priority to Catholic faith and practices, over other religions or philosophical outlooks. After all, the students in our schools deliberately chose to enrol in a Catholic institution. It is clear that, in Catholic schools, religion should not be an individual, private matter that doesn't figure in daily school life. Catholic schools must be involved in the faith formation of the students. Students should be discouraged from taking refuge in the individual, private realm.”*⁷⁶

It would appear that this *Kerygmatic Variant* would be a better and fairer description of a discrete model of its own (replacing what Pollefeyt has caricatured as the *Monologue School*) rather than sitting incongruously within the fold of the *Dialogue School* in the terms he has described.

Much of what Pollefeyt has to say about the context in which Catholic education currently finds itself and some of the strategies it ought to adopt in meeting these challenges are well worth considering.

⁷⁵ Op. cit. Slide 66.

⁷⁶ Op. cit. Slide 58.

There can be little doubt, for example, that the technical and dehumanising approach to human work should be rejected and genuinely Christian alternatives should be offered to challenge the dehumanising technocratic culture that is currently so pervasive.⁷⁷ Pollefeyt also proposes that education must pursue what is true, beautiful and good – echoing the classical teachings of Plato and Aristotle. As already noted, one problematic technique employed by Pollefeyt is the use of empirical data to *inform* practice. While this kind of information has its place and objective data is useful in its own way, two caveats must be admitted. The first has already been demonstrated with reference to the *Dialogue/Monologue Schools*, namely, that objective data can still be interpreted subjectively and have the appearance of objectivity while expressing a partisan opinion. Even the categories into which responses are classified can shape the way in which data can be interpreted. It is arguable that the use of *Lickert scale*⁷⁸ opinion surveys to determine the most desirable outcome is not the best instrument to be applied to determining spiritual reality or divine truth. For example, had a *Likert scale* survey been the instrument applied to determine the future shape of belief during the Arian Crisis of the fourth century, a very different outcome would have resulted. In this case of *Athanasius contra mundum*, it was ultimately Athanasius who had accurately discerned the truth.

The other difficulty concerns the limitations of applying a scientific instrument to the non-material realm. Joseph Ratzinger drew attention to the dangers of leaning too heavily on this aspect of human knowledge in *Principles of Catholic Theology*, where he recalled Plato's *Gorgias*, and singled out the figure of Callicles, the pragmatist, for whom only the empirical mattered. Ratzinger comments:

„Enlightenment in this sense is illogical reason, for which only the knowable is valid and which, therefore, loses itself more and more in the makeable. Culture is equated with the extent of one's knowledge; only the empirical has value. But this means ruin for man. The new remedy that has made its appearance seems at first to be full of promise: the ruthless, scientific dissection of oneself, psychoanalysis, the 'enlightenment' referred now to man himself

⁷⁷ Pollefeyt, *Towards a Contemporary Identity for the Catholic School. Principals & Parish Priests Meeting at Flemington, Melbourne. Australia. Tuesday, September 5.*

⁷⁸ The Lickert scale survey typically offers a scale for responding to set questions, where the participants are expected to rate their reactions on a five point sliding scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

and thus becomes total... That is why the very simple person who bears within himself a sense of values and thus a sensitivity towards others, toward what is right and beautiful and true, is immeasurably more learned than the most experienced technocrat with his computer brain."⁷⁹

Pollefeyt, reflecting the perspective of Boeve, not only holds back from affirming the unique role of the Church in the salvation of all humanity, but also fails to acknowledge that the baptised student is ontologically different from one who has not received the supernatural life of grace.⁸⁰ The role of the Catholic educator is reduced to assisting the students to immerse themselves in their chosen narratives.

Part 3. Conclusions

For nearly forty years, many Catholic schools have been organised in a way that seems to have undermined their traditional identity. The attempt to redefine the success of the Catholic educational enterprise in terms of amended criteria should be resisted, whether in its earlier form as the expression of a *vulgarised Rahneriansim* or its more recent form – *Re-contextualisation*. Further attempts to radicalise Catholic education must also be addressed. Any future attempt to reorganise Catholic schools to make adaptations in the light of contemporary cultural pressures should be examined carefully in the light of their capacity to integrate authentic Catholic teaching. While contemporary cultural insights may have much to offer, they need to be subjected to a balanced critique rather than an automatic response of capitulation and embrace.

Overall Conclusions

It would appear that the whole Catholic educational project faces an important decision regarding its future development. Decades of support for the *vulgarised Rahnerian* anthropological vision is now serving as a conduit for the *Re-contextualisation* perspectives of Boeve and his collaborators, and a parallel effort to re-define the meaning of a successful Catholic educational enterprise. Despite the clear findings of contemporary educational research of eminent and respected theorists such as Hattie, Sweller, Kirschner, Clarke and Lillard (all of whom support a narrowing of the field of study of novice learners), determined efforts are still being made in the field of catechesis to emphasise the *symbolic*

⁷⁹ Ratzinger, Joseph. *Principles of Catholic Theology*, p. 341.

⁸⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1266, 1803-1828.

over *concrete real*; a disparagement of *content* in favour of *process*. This continues to find its most damaging application in the denigration of a permanently valid and divinely revealed *Deposit of Faith* (admittedly, one which continues to be subject to ever deepening understanding).⁸¹ Contemporary students are encouraged to exchange this patrimony for a *brave new world* of moral and intellectual autonomy, whereby they are encouraged to opt for their own inexpertly constructed, personally validated version of reality, made in their own image and according to their own taste. It can be argued, of course, that such a worldview is neither brave nor new. Students are merely being asked to *situate themselves* outside the hermeneutic circle of the Catholic faith, and told that they should make up their own minds regarding what they will accept – all based on their own independent inquiries.

Catholic schools now face the choice of grounding themselves in an effective epistemology, supported now both by the traditions of the Church and the findings of modern educational research, which is capable of mediating the Christian message with clarity. Further work needs to be done to articulate the practical implications of such a desirable prospect. Alternatively, Catholic schools may choose to adopt a *Re-contextualising* trajectory and widen the gulf between themselves and their traditional roots still further.

⁸¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 66.