



ECSI @ KU LEUVEN

***A response to Review of the Religious
Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools
in the Archdiocese of Melbourne***

KU LEUVEN



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An ECSI Response

With the intention of reaffirming the strength and positive trajectory of our long-standing partnership with Catholic schools, education offices, and dioceses throughout the world, including most especially those throughout Victoria and across Australia, we offer this response to the *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (hereafter *Review*) recently published in the Archdiocese of Melbourne¹. In what follows, this response specifically addresses the most prominent misrepresentations and errors in Sections 11-14 (pages 19-27) of the *Review* that critique the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) theologies, empirical research and implementation partnership which has evolved very fruitfully over more than fifteen years in Catholic schools across Victoria and beyond. While this paper does not intend to speak to the wider issues and recommendations regarding Religious Education (RE) in the *Review*, we nevertheless hope this response is received by the authors and commissioners of that document in a spirit of willingness to engage in dialogue about the shape of Catholic school identity in contexts of pluralisation and secularisation like that of the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

PROCEDURAL INADEQUACIES

As a matter of procedure, it is common practice for reviewers to engage with those who have responsibility for leading the program under evaluation, not only as a matter of natural justice, but also importantly for the purpose of seeking a clear understanding and thereby mitigating the risk of misrepresentation and error. As is most unfortunately evident in the *Review*, the authors have not consulted those with responsibilities for leading the research and implementation of the ECSI partnership – neither those at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (the Catholic University of Leuven), nor as far as we are aware those at the state or diocesan levels in Victoria or Melbourne. This critical inadequacy breaches one of the *Review's* own terms of reference² and the common sense principles of academic exchange and engagement between partners in ministry. Leaving aside the issues



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¹ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Nov 2023), available at <https://www.macs.vic.edu.au/MelbourneArchdioceseCatholicSchools/media/Documentation/Documents/RE-Curriculum-Review-Report.pdf>.

² The document's own *Terms of Reference* direct the reviewers to "Draw from the experience, advice and wisdom of relevant parties". On analysis, the reviewers were therefore otherwise compelled to consult with ECSI leaders in Belgium and Victoria, given that approximately eight pages of the review were devoted to ECSI and that therein the reviewers found that ECSI was "ill-suited to the purpose of understanding and promoting Catholic identity", a 'hindrance' to that task; an 'obstacle to the work of promoting the Catholicity of 'Catholic' schools" and "an impediment to the development of an effective form of religious education within them".

Instead of discrediting certain Catholic communities through the selection of statistics without intellectual integrity, and instead of setting countries with different Catholic communities against each other, an infinitely more fruitful and mutually enriching approach would be the recognition that pluralisation, secularisation and detraditionalisation are phenomena seen in all Western countries to varying degrees given the specifics of local context.

of ethics and validity which arise from such a failure to engage, at an ecclesial level the current magisterial priorities for dialogue and synodality (*cfr infra*) appear likewise ignored in the identified sections of the *Review* – a result that calls into serious question the scope of its sources of input and therefore also the accuracy of its findings.

Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) is a research and implementation program of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium (<https://www.ecsi.site/au/>). Established in 1432, our faculty currently occupies the 5th place ranking in the *QS World Ranking for*

*Theology, Divinity and Religious Studies*³ and is charged with the granting of canonical degrees in the name of the Holy See (<https://theo.kuleuven.be/en>). The ECSI program has a fifteen-year history of a close and very positive collaboration in assessing and enhancing Catholic school identity with 12 Australian dioceses (and their offices for Catholic Education and their schools) and Australian Catholic University.⁴ Over these richly collaborative 15 years, ECSI has completed research on Catholic identity in 3,871 Australian schools and collected data from 449,787 respondents, presumably the most extensive data collection from Catholic schools worldwide. As part of this research, no less than 447 Catholic Education Office staff, school principals, and teachers have followed an *Intensive Course* on ECSI at KU Leuven in Belgium to learn deeply about the theological, pedagogical and empirical foundations of Catholic school identity. The theologies and empirical models of ECSI have been applied in nearly one dozen countries and are freely available in the form of a 'Massive Open Online Course' (MOOC) on edX, the world's leading university level self-study platform⁵. Furthermore, these theologies and models have been presented to peer researchers in major international theological journals and to the *Congregation for Catholic Education* (Vatican City).

It is most unfortunate that the *Review* judges the principal theologians involved in ECSI *ad hominem* on the basis of the number of ordinations and cases of 'debaptism' "in the Flemish Church"⁶ (which the *Review* erroneously surmises that ECSI proponents explain are the results of literalism as a significant factor in Belgium, but which are more accurately understood as results stemming directly from the sexual scandals in the Church). The report appears to suggest that "Australia has nothing to learn from Belgium" and must instead learn from the UK, a country where the (minority) Catholic Church is confronted with immense religious disaffiliation of (young) people⁷. Both suggestions as such are lost on us, as we are not of the

³ QS World University Rankings by Subject 2023: Theology, Divinity & Religious Studies, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2023/theology-divinity-religious-studies>.

⁴ DIDIER POLLEFEY & JAN BOUWENS, *Identity in Dialogue: Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Research Methodology and Research Results in Catholic Schools in Victoria, Australia* (Christian Religious Education and School Identity, 1), Zürich – Berlin, LIT-Verlag, 2014.

⁵ Available at <https://www.edx.org/learn/education/ku-leuven-enhancing-catholic-school-identity>.

⁶ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Nov 2023), 22.

⁷ See the following as publicly available sources in support of this claim: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021> (data from 2021 census); <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/27/britain-post-christian-ex-archbishop-canterbury-williams> (description from ROWAN WILLIAMS that British society should be understood as post-Christian); <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/lost->

conviction that relationships should be decided on the competitive basis of what Churches should learn or for that matter 'should not learn' from each other. Rather we encourage dialogue, collegiality and fraternity among all Catholics internationally, each community with its own unique and important contribution. Instead of discrediting certain Catholic communities through the selection of statistics without intellectual integrity, and instead of setting countries with different Catholic communities against each other, an

We affirm once again that the theologically normative positions for which ECSI explicitly advocates are wholly consistent with the vision of Catholic education that has been articulated consistently by the Magisterium over decades of Conciliar and post-Conciliar teaching. These ECSI positions should have unquestionably been one of the central areas of focus in any review of ECSI's significant contributions to Catholic school identity. Such a focus is unfortunately absent in the Review, whose authors opt instead for extensive reflections on options for Catholic school identity that are explicitly rejected by ECSI as well as the concerns of those who have had little to do with the theological and empirical investigations of ECSI or the implementation thereof.

infinitely more fruitful and mutually enriching approach would be the recognition that pluralisation, secularisation and detraditionalisation are phenomena seen in all Western countries to varying degrees given the specifics of local context.⁸ The same is true for cases of sexual abuse in the Church in the different countries or the rise of the 'nones' in sociological research⁹. Secularisation is generally evident more pronouncedly in Flemish Catholic schools than in those of Australia, not because the Australian Church is 'better' or 'more successful' than the Flemish Church, but because schools in Belgium are majority schools (75% of all schools nationally) under direct forms of government regulation. In this context, the Belgian Constitution does not allow any discriminatory

student selection upon enrolment. As the data show regarding external critique (atheism) and relativism, and even with regard to the crisis of post-critical belief in international analysis, in fact the situation is not so different between Belgium and Australia (see further below, Post-Critical Belief).

With the scope and depth of the ECSI theological, empirical and educational dimensions and with the transparency of the ECSI research and implementation partnership over more than fifteen years, it is most unfortunate that the *Review* attends so superficially and erroneously to the ECSI conceptual frameworks and empirical findings.

faith-the-uk%27s-changing-attitudes-to-religion.pdf study by the Policy Institute at King's College London, May 2023); <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/catholics-england-and-wales.html> (Statistics on Catholics in England and Wales); <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-feb-contemporary-catholicism-report-may16.pdf> (STEPHEN BULLIVANT, *Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A statistical report based on recent British Social Attitudes survey data*, St Mary's University, 2018); QUENTIN WODON, *Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools in the West* in *Journal of Catholic Education* 24/1 (July 2021), 285-29, DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401182021>; <https://www.cescensus.org.uk/downloads/CensusDigestEngland2021.pdf> (Catholic Education Service for England and Wales: Digest of 2021 Census Data for Schools and Colleges in England).

⁸ LIEVEN BOEVE, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, London – New York, Continuum, 2007, chapter 1.

⁹ As an interesting starting point, see JEFF LEVIN, MATT BRADSHAW, BYRON R. JOHNSON, & RODNEY STARK, *Are Religious "Nones" Really Not Religious?: Revisiting Glenn, Three Decades Later*, in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 18 (2022), article 7.

METHODOLOGICAL MISREPRESENTATIONS

At the methodological level, the ECSI research and implementation partnership is characterised by the reviewers as a sociological and psychological endeavour, while its extensive theological foundations and normative positions are either largely ignored or grossly misrepresented. Furthermore, it is paradoxical that the sociological and psycho-affective data generated by the ECSI empirical investigations are not even discussed in the *Review* – much less, how such concepts and data pose important challenges for the shaping of Catholic school identity in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and the response options to be taken as a result.

As a hallmark endeavour of our Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (KU Leuven), ECSI theological and empirical research is an example of the 'transdisciplinary' approach towards theological reflection recommended by Pope Francis in his apostolic letter *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* of 1 November 2023¹⁰ (the same date as the *Review*) – presenting an irony in these simultaneous releases that is not lost on those associated with ECSI. In this paper, we affirm once again that the theologically normative positions for which ECSI explicitly advocates are wholly consistent with the vision of Catholic education that has been articulated consistently by the Magisterium over decades of Conciliar and post-Conciliar teaching. These ECSI positions should have unquestionably been one of the central areas of focus in any review of ECSI's significant contributions to Catholic school identity. Such a focus is unfortunately absent in the *Review*, whose authors opt instead for extensive reflections on options for Catholic school identity that are explicitly rejected by ECSI as well as the concerns of those who have had little to do with the theological and empirical investigations of ECSI or the implementation thereof.

Here we affirm once again that the theological and empirical contributions of ECSI are primarily concerned with the identity and mission of the Catholic school, and are not as such a program for religious education.

CONCEPTUAL ERRORS

Likely stemming directly from grossly insufficient investigation and an absence to date of dialogue with those involved in the leadership of the ECSI partnership, the abundance of conceptual errors in the identified sections of the *Review* is unfortunately significant. In what follows here, we attend to four of the largest underlying misconceptions.

Reduction of Catholic School Identity to RE

At the level of meta-analysis, the *Review* appears erroneously to conflate RE and the ECSI theologically normative positions on Catholic school identity by claiming that "ECSIP [*sic*] proposes a style of education or instruction, including the *Pedagogy of Encounter*. [...] Therefore, it is relevant to explore the assumptions and backgrounds of the ECSIP approach"¹¹. While it is therefore surprising to enter into a critique of ECSI's positions on Catholic school identity from the perspective of a review of the most recent RE program in the

¹⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam* (01 November 2023), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html. For unofficial English translation, see <https://returntotradition.org/unofficial-full-english-translation-of-francis-revolutionary-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam-plus-breaking-news-report-on-text>.

¹¹ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum*, 19.

Archdiocese of Melbourne, it is also evident that the reviewers are unaware that the principal theologians involved in ECSI have themselves developed and advocated for decades for an RE framework known as the '*Hermeneutical Communicative Model*' (HCM)¹². In a critical analysis of the ECSI contributions to RE, it would therefore be significantly more appropriate to have reviewed the HCM framework – which itself served as a source from which Catholic schools in Victoria collaboratively developed the '*Pedagogy of Encounter*'. Here we affirm once again that the theological and empirical contributions of ECSI are primarily concerned with the identity and mission of the Catholic school, and are not as such a program for religious education.

Erroneous Simplification of the Post-Critical Belief Scale

On specific areas of discussion, the report is most critical of the Post-Critical Belief (PCB) Scale that measures the various and intersecting cognitive belief styles of individuals involved in Catholic school communities. To put it simply, it appears that the PCB Scale (typology) is – for the authors of the report – an invention of the American atheist David Wulff¹³ for the purpose of critically addressing Protestant literalism in the United States, leaving this typology wholly without application either for investigating the cognitive styles of religious belief in other Western-like contexts such as Europe or Australia or for the purposes of the Catholic community in those contexts. In relation to this academically and ecclesiologically unfounded dismissal, the reviewers affirm that "Catholic understanding precisely rejects the notions of literalism and textual inerrancy, salvation by personal conversion, and other forms of fundamentalist uninterpreted and unmediated faith associated with Protestant Christianity"¹⁴ – an assertion of theirs that is paradoxically highly consistent with the ECSI theological foundations they then claim to reject (with our notable exception that not all Protestants are committed to such positions).

The core problem with the presentation of the PCB Scale as found in the *Review* is therefore its gross over-simplification and conceptual misrepresentation. If the reviewers' critique were accurate, then Wulff (and later on the Catholic psychologist of religion, Dirk Hutsebaut) would only have been concerned with two

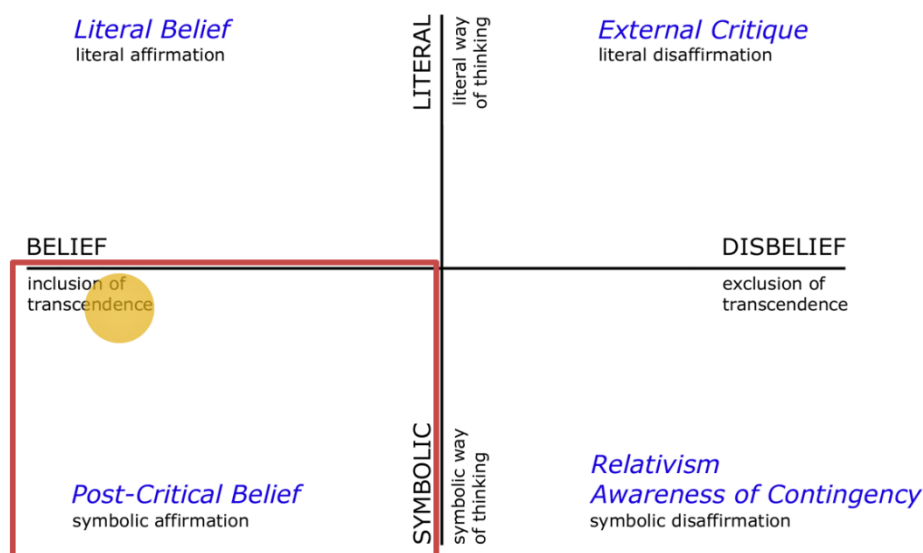


Figure 1
Post-Critical Belief Scale, with added emphasis (in red outline) on the type of post-critical belief at the intersection of affirmation of transcendence and symbolic ways of thinking.

¹² DIDIER POLLEFEY & MICHAEL RICHARDS, *The Living Art of Religious Education: A Paradigm of Hermeneutics and Dialogue for RE at Faith Schools Today*, in *British Journal of Religious Education* 42/3 (2020), 313-324, DOI <https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2019.1593106>. See also DIDIER POLLEFEY, *Hermeneutical Learning in Religious Education*, in *Journal of Religious Education* (published online 16 March 2020), DOI <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-020-00090-x>.

¹³ DAVID WULFF, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views*, New York: Wiley, 1997.

¹⁴ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Nov 2023), 22.

opposing factors in the typology: literal belief (literalism) and external critique (atheism). Instead, it is of critical importance to note that both Wulff and Hutsebaut (along with the theologians involved in ECSI) distinguish *four types* in the PCB Scale: the previous two along with relativism and post-critical belief. In fact, it is precisely the position of post-critical belief that the *Review* (rightly) defends in its critique of literalism, namely that religious faith is – for a post-critical believer – always a matter of mediation and interpretation.¹⁵ The reviewers' defence of post-critical belief is consistent with the position of Hutsebaut who argues for such as the most 'mature' form of religious belief.¹⁶ It is for this reason therefore that it is Hutsebaut's work on the PCB Scale (and not that of Wulff) that comes into dialogue with the ECSI theologies and empirical research. Towards this form of post-critical belief giving shape to a rich spiritual life of faith, ECSI's advocacy for the Catholic Dialogue School (Catholic tradition in dialogue with the pluralising and secularising context of today) rejects both literalism and atheism. Instead, ours is the model of a Catholic school community understood and experienced as a welcoming, faith-oriented, hermeneutical environment¹⁷ of Christian hospitality¹⁸, and by doing so intends to counteract the positions of individualism, uninterpreted belief, unmediated faith and religious fundamentalism.

The *Review* further speculates – without any relevant evidence provided to support its claim – that "part of the explanation for the espousal and application of the 'literal belief' model is

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the hope that using it to characterise traditional Catholic faith and practice may help to explain the collapse of Catholicism in Flanders"¹⁹. To put it simply, it appears that the reviewers believe that the proponents of ECSI use the 'literal belief' model to explain the crisis of the Church in Flanders – an argument that is significantly flawed since literalism is assuredly no longer an issue in Belgium (nor, we argue, is it the most significant concern in Australia). In the ECSI analysis, the crisis of Catholic education in Belgium – and in much of the world – is *not* literalism but the overuse of the model of 'Christian values education' which seeks a far-too-simplistic harmonisation between common human experience and the Gospel at significant and irrevocable costs to the particularity of the Catholic faith tradition. Such a reduction of the rich Catholic faith tradition to values or virtues in itself creates the kind of relativism and horizontalism that it implicitly seeks

¹⁵ DIDIER POLLEFEYT & JAN BOUWENS, *Framing the Identity of Catholic Schools: Empirical Methodology for Quantitative Research of the Catholic Identity of an Education Institute*, in *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2/2 (2010), 193-211. For an elaboration of the *Post-Critical Belief Scale*, see especially pages 194-199.

¹⁶ BART DURIEZ, JESSIE DEZUTTER, BART NEYRINCK & DIRK HUTSEBAUT, *An Introduction to the Post-Critical Belief Scale: Internal Structure and External Relationships*, in *Psyche & Logos* 28 (2007), 767-793.

¹⁷ DIDIER POLLEFEYT, *Religious Education as Opening the Hermeneutical Space*, in *Journal of Religious Education* 68 (2020), 115-124.

¹⁸ ROBYN HORNER, DIDIER POLLEFEYT, JAN BOUWENS, TERESA BROWN, CHRISTIAAN JACOBS-VANDEGEER, MAEVE-LOUISE HEANEY & MICHAEL BUCHANAN, *Openness to Faith as a Disposition for Teachers in Catholic Schools*, in *International Journal of Practical Theology* 24/2 (Oct 2020), 231-251.

¹⁹ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Nov 2023), 22.

to avoid.²⁰ It is for this reason that ECSI advocates for the transformation of literal belief into the rich hermeneutics of post-critical belief.

Consistent with our critique on the significant risks of the 'values education' model of Catholic school identity, empirical data from nearly 135,000 respondents in Australian Catholic schools (Figure 2) alarmingly reveal that literal belief among students is *not* transformed into post-critical belief but into strong relativism and even external critique (atheism). At the same time however, similar longitudinal data of the impact of ECSI show that over the past 15 years – even despite increasing secularisation – post-critical belief has been strengthened in Australian Catholic schools among the staff and school boards, an important and significant starting point for the transformation of the faith lives of young people.

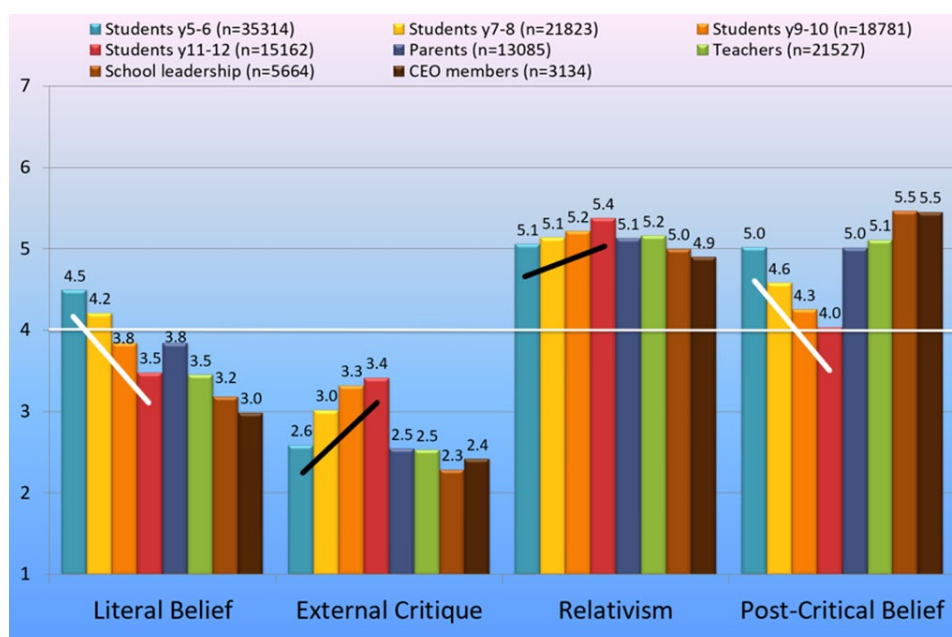


Figure 2

Post-Critical Belief Scale, scale means differentiated for all respondent groups. 134,490 respondents from 17 dioceses across Australia, 2019-2023. Respondents in diocesan offices from 2011 onwards.

Implausibility of the Reconfessionalisation Shift

The *Review* refers to the work of the Australian theologian Graham Rossiter on the ECSI program and this brings us to what should otherwise be the heart of a robust international discussion on the shape of Catholic school identity. Rossiter is quoted by the report as saying:

“The normative framework of this research is the ideal of the re-contextualisation of Catholic identity, based on dialogue with plurality and a symbolic understanding of religion. (...) But one might wonder whether all of the Australian Catholic Church authorities who funded the project are fully aware of how radical the notion of re-contextualisation can be; perhaps some may really be in favour of re-confessionalisation.”²¹

The reviewers' reliance on this quote is notably significant, not only because Rossiter recognises – in contrast with the *Review* – that ECSI espouses a symbolic and not a literal understanding of religion and a radicality in the preferred position of recontextualisation. Indeed, such recontextualisation of the living Catholic faith

²⁰ DIDIER POLLEFEY & MICHAEL RICHARDS, *Catholic Dialogue Schools: Enhancing Catholic School Identity in Contemporary Contexts of Religious Pluralisation and Social and Individual Secularisation*, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 91/1 (2020), 77-113.

²¹ GRAHAM ROSSITER, *Perspective on the Use of the Construct 'Catholic Identity' for Australian Catholic Schooling: Areas in the Discourse in Need of More Emphasis and Further Attention – Part 2*, in *Journal of Religious Education* 61/2 (2013), 25.

tradition in the schools of today is *radical* (of the roots), as is Christ's own mission and message. Such radicality resists the position of instinctively imposing 'one's own, untouchable truth' on the other simply because one has the power to do so. Rather, such radicality challenges us — as Christ did — towards open and deep encounters with others and towards dialogue with the context in which people live, searching for the deepening (re-rooting) of their faith today. Of course, such a radical Christ-like challenge will bring the reality of the cross.

Nonetheless, our hope should be that the majority of the staff and principals in Catholic schools are ready to take up this challenge of a deep recontextualisation of the Catholic faith tradition in the encounter with the context in which they find themselves, a context characterised by growing pluralism and secularism. In fact, when surveyed about their 'ideal Catholic school' (Figure 3), 66.8% (noted in green) of the principals of Catholic schools in Melbourne opt for such radical recontextualisation, while no more than 4.8% (noted in blue) support reconfessionalisation (the reclaiming of Catholic school identity as it was known generations ago) as a viable alternative. For some in the Church, these findings may be concerning or even frightening;

Indeed, such recontextualisation of the living Catholic faith tradition in the schools of today is radical (of the roots), as is Christ's own mission and message. Such radicality resists the position of instinctively imposing 'one's own, untouchable truth' on the other simply because one has the power to do so. Rather, such radicality challenges us — as Christ did — towards open and deep encounters with others and towards dialogue with the context in which people live, searching for the deepening (re-rooting) of their faith today.

nonetheless, such radical recontextualisation of the Catholic faith tradition is the way forward that Pope Francis proposes for the Church in the world today.

Recontextualisation – our preferred position theologically *and* culturally – does not necessary exclude reconfessionalisation, although there are concerns with the latter. As our empirical research suggests, an exclusive choice for the reconfessionalisation of Catholic schools will unfortunately serve to create further polarisation and

fragmentation in school staff between their role at school and their life outside the school. As we have observed, this disintegration too often results in staff quietly putting their beliefs to one side, living with unresolved tensions, and drifting into a so-called 'neutrality' in relation to the Catholic faith tradition. Regarding the students, the unfortunate reality is that, having already gone through years of Catholic education in Melbourne schools, a majority disaffiliate from the tradition, become indifferent or even reject Christianity, as data from Australia unambiguously show. It therefore gives us serious pause to observe that the authors of the *Review* appear to embrace a reconfessionalising outlook for Catholic schools, rejecting the – theologically legitimate *and* culturally plausible – option of recontextualisation from a post-critical belief perspective. Such a reconfessionalising outlook seems to completely ignore the contextual reality of Catholic education in Melbourne (Figures 2 and 3) and also the impact of current pedagogical approaches (still unfortunately imbued to a large extent with correlation didactics and Christian values education) which appear only to add to the growing disaffiliation of young people. Reconfessionalisation is neither what school communities see as most relevant and viable, nor what the students need for the development of their faith life in a pluralising and secularising world today. Such an approach will not achieve the aim of strengthening the Catholic school and its community in the Australian context.

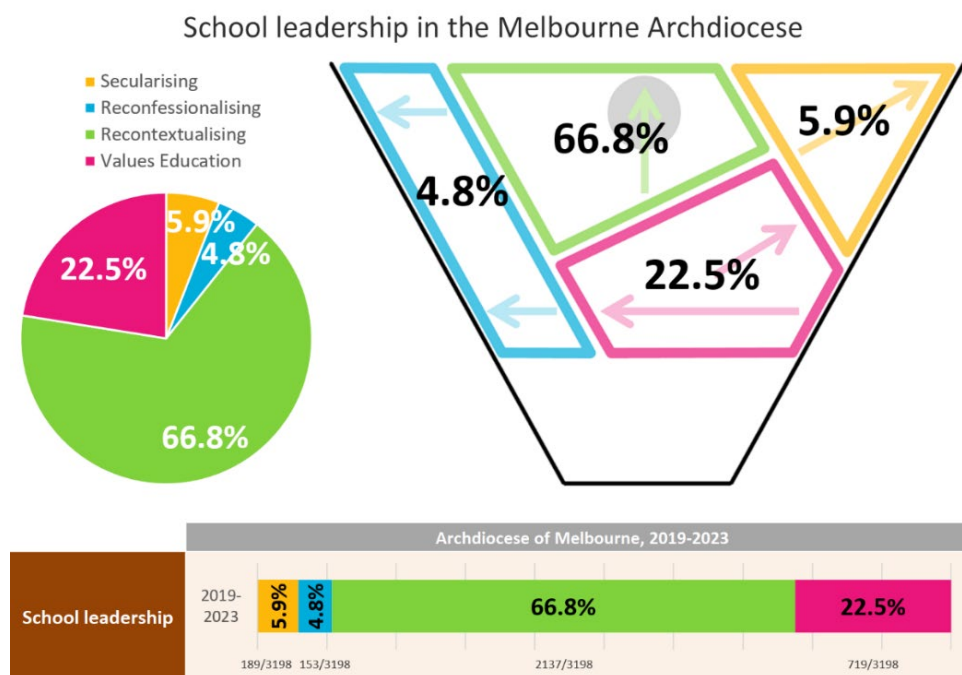


Figure 3
Division of Subpopulations, normative level ('ideal school'), for 3,198 local leadership members in 362 schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese, 2019-2023.

Moreover, by leading Catholic schools along the path of ecclesial reconfessionalisation, applied through a compulsory neo-catechetical formation of all young people without regard for the diversity in their religious affiliation or philosophical vision, and without taking into account the specific and complex context of school communities, will inevitably further fuel secularist and anti-ecclesial political forces in society towards the marginalisation of Catholic schools and further undermine their public financing in the future. We see this debate taking place all over the world. Catholic education systems everywhere — the political realities in Australia can testify to this — are faced with a growing critique on confessionally-based schools. It is important that Catholic schools are prepared for the ongoing debates and public scrutiny. When the time comes, it will be crucial that we can prove that our curricula both promote the Catholic faith and fully respect — from beginning to end — the diversity of opinions, views and practices that exist among our school populations. We are required to demonstrate more and more that Catholic education benefits the personal

formation and well-being of everyone involved and is not only a vehicle to serve the specific interests of a private organisation and a (limited) group of Catholic initiates.

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It is furthermore astonishing that the report uses Professor Graham Rossiter as an authoritative Australian academic voice *against* ECSI, as if he were against recontextualisation and defended a purely reconfessionalising strategy for Catholic schools. Rather, it appears that Rossiter is — like theologians involved with ECSI — realistically critical about the translation of reconfessionalising agendas into neo-catechetical approaches for all regardless of religious or philosophical identity, or as he

refers to such a trajectory: "ecclesiastical drift in religious education".²² "Statistically", he writes, "30% of the Australian Catholic school students are not Catholic; and about 5% of the Catholic students (less than 4% of total students) are, or will be, regular participants at Sunday Mass".²³ For him, a religious education that concentrates almost exclusively on 'Catholic religious formation' for all will be perceived as largely irrelevant by the students. Consistent with an ECSI outlook on Catholic school identity, he observes the erroneous assumptions behind the reconfessionalisation strategy: "The problem derives primarily from thinking that Catholic schools and religious education can create church-going Catholics".²⁴ Like many other Catholic theologians worldwide, Rossiter acknowledges the relevance of the theological idea of recontextualisation developed by Lieven Boeve, professor of systematic theology and the present Director-General of Catholic Education in Flanders. "In my view, Boeve's approach is continuous with the long tradition since Vatican II, trying to re-imagine how Catholicism might best respond to the modern world. His ideas on recontextualising are both important and challenging".²⁵ The core concern that Rossiter has with the use of the concept 'recontextualisation', it seems, is that it could be misunderstood by staff and students as a form of "problematic restorationism".²⁶ In short, it appears as though the *Review* has altogether misconstrued Rossiter's position and erroneously applied such a misunderstanding to a critique on the ECSI theological foundations for Catholic school identity.

Erroneous Uncoupling of Dialogue and Evangelisation

In fact, the position of ECSI is more optimistic than that of Rossiter about the evangelising potential for all members of the school community amid a commitment to renew the Catholic faith tradition through a recontextualisation in which they are included. In this way, ECSI affirms that dialogue and evangelisation are inextricably related for Catholic people and institutions. Ours is therefore also an evangelising program – but



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²² GRAHAM ROSSITER, *An Empirical Study of the Problem of 'Ecclesiastical Drift' in Catholic School Religious Education*, Preprints 2022, 2022110050, DOI 10.20944/preprints202211.0050.v1. See quote on page 2: "Catholic RE, especially for senior classes, needs to give more attention to a critical pedagogy with contemporary issue-related content that investigates the shaping influence of culture on people's beliefs, values and lifestyle."

²³ GRAHAM ROSSITER, *Re-contextualising Catholic School Religious Education: Educating Young People Spiritually, Morally and Religiously for the 21st Century*, in *The Person and the Challenges: The Journal of Theology, Education, Canon Law and Social Studies Inspired by Pope John Paul II*, Pontifical University of John Paul II, Krakow, Vol. 10/1 (2020), 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

ECSI affirms that dialogue and evangelisation are inextricably related for Catholic people and institutions. Ours is also an evangelising program – but evangelisation through dialogue with diversity and context, and with respect for the religious freedom of every human person (Dignitatis Humanae).

evangelisation through dialogue with diversity and context, and with respect for the religious freedom of every human person (*Dignitatis Humanae*). For this reason, the Melbourne Scale (attending to the Catholic tradition in dialogue with context) cannot be separated from the Victoria Scale (attending to diversity in dialogue with Catholic identity). Within the Victoria Scale typology, ECSI proposes the model of the Catholic Dialogue School (with an emphasis on the importance of all *three* words) in distinction

from the monologue school, the colourful school and the colourless school.²⁷ About the 'Catholic Dialogue School', the authors of the *Review* state, "The alignment of the favoured identity for Catholic schools with that of the 'Dialogue School' [...] rests on a faulty assumption involving a false characterisation of the nature of Catholicism, as expressed in its own self-understanding"²⁸ – a claim which some of their own assertions seem to undermine.

In stark contrast, after the Catholic Dialogue School was presented alongside the ECSI theologies and empirical findings at the 2019 CEEC International Symposium in Brussels on *The Catholic School and the Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges*²⁹, Archbishop Angelo Vincenzo Zani, at that time Secretary of the *Congregation for Catholic Education* in Vatican City, commented in a published interview:

“ We want to confront ourselves with the other who differs from us. We want to consciously step out of ourselves. We don't want to lock ourselves up with like-minded people, and we do this because God gave us this example, because we are relational human beings, influenced by his image. We must not fear the other. Pluralism is a wealth, and it is only through the difference of and in the dialogue with the other that we can grow and discover ourselves. Therefore, our image of God supports the model of the *Catholic Dialogue School*. Because God is dialogue and also enters into dialogue, we also opt for dialogue.³⁰

When considering the longitudinal impact of ECSI research and implementation in the Archdiocese of Melbourne, we see — within Melbourne's own context of secularisation and detraditionalisation — a growing understanding and support for the Catholic Dialogue School among school leadership (Figure 4). In fact, of the four primary types of Catholic School identity in the typology, this is the only model that receives such extensive affirmation. Simultaneously, we note that support for the (reconfessionalising) monologue school is increasingly on the decline in a world that is increasingly polarised and in which the Church can be

²⁷ DIDIER POLLEFEYT & JAN BOUWENS, *The Vatican and the Catholic Dialogue School as a 'Place of Differences Living Together in Harmony'*, in *Marriage, Families & Spirituality (formerly INTAMS Review)* 28/2 (2022), 291-305.

²⁸ NATINA GIACCO, JOHN HALDANE & GERARD O'SHEA, *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (Nov 2023), 24.

²⁹ DIDIER POLLEFEYT & JAN BOUWENS, *Assessing and Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Towards a Recontextualising Catholic Dialogue School*, in *Acts of the International Symposium: The Catholic School and the Intercultural and Interreligious Challenges* (Brussels, 14-15 March 2019), Brussels, (Nov 2019), 40-64. The European Committee for Catholic Education (ECCE, or more commonly in French "CEECE" Comité Européen pour l'Enseignement Catholique), is an international non-profit organisation founded in 1974 that facilitates the cooperation of Catholic education networks across 27 European countries, representing more than 35,000 Catholic schools that serve a total of approximately 8 million students (<http://www.ceec.be>).

³⁰ VINCENZO ZANI (secretary of the former Congregation for Catholic Education), *Ons Godsbeeld schraagt het model van de Katholieke Dialoogschool*, in *Tertio*, (22 May 2019), 2-3.

a powerful counter-voice against such polarisation. Similar levels of affirmation for the Catholic Dialogue School also hold true among students, who see even more starkly than the adults the future irrelevance of the monologue school. Thus, for staff and students alike, it is evident that the Catholic Dialogue School is the most viable and appealing confessional alternative.

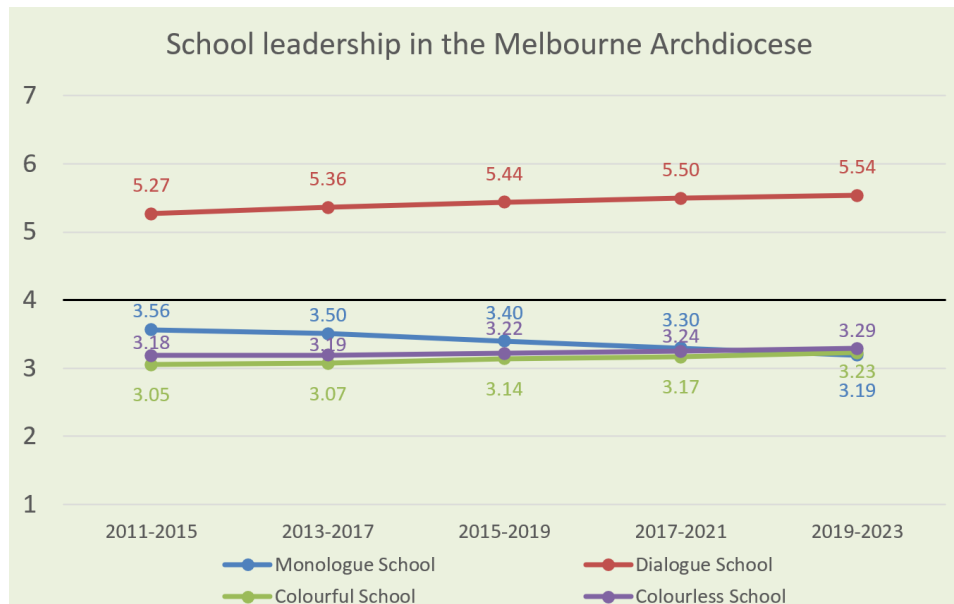


Figure 4
Victoria Scale longitudinal trends 2011-2023, factual level ('current practice'), for 9,065 local school leadership members in primary and secondary Catholic schools in the Melbourne Archdiocese.

Alongside leaders, staff and students, parents who send their children to Catholic primary and secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne likewise express overwhelming support for the vision of the Catholic Dialogue School. Figures 5a and 5b show that 80.1% of the parents support this model, with very little explicit resistance. They perceive this approach already in the current practice of the schools (5.13/7), and desire to make it stronger in the future (5.30/7). However, only rarely do parents still discover traces of the (reconfessionalising) monologue school, and a notable majority are resistant to this approach.

The Catholic Dialogue School that recontextualises its faith tradition from a post-critical believing perspective

Parents who send their children to Catholic primary and secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne likewise express overwhelming support for the vision of the Catholic Dialogue School.

is not only the position with the strongest support in the schools in Melbourne, and beyond, it is also the official position of the Catholic Church.³¹ Misrepresenting the theologically normative positions of ECSI or discrediting its theologians will not change anything about this.³² We

³¹ DIDIER POLLEFEYT, *Teaching the Unteachable or Why Too Much Good Is Bad: Religious Education in Catholic Schools Today*, in *Religions* 12/10 (2021), DOI <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100810>.

³² ROBYN HORNER, *Enhancing Catholic School Identity: A Response to Peter McGregor*, in *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88/2, (May 2023), 112-136. See the quote from the conclusion of this article: "By simplistically interpreting ECSI, [Peter McGregor] undermines the seriousness of the issue it seeks to address [...]. By demonizing the research and its calls for authentic renewal, [he] remains blind to the finding that further, frantic efforts at just telling people what they should believe are correlated with increased levels of secularisation. It is time to stop shooting the messenger and accept that the research provides a scientific basis for understanding the current situation in Catholic schools in Australia and beyond, and a genuinely Catholic way forward."

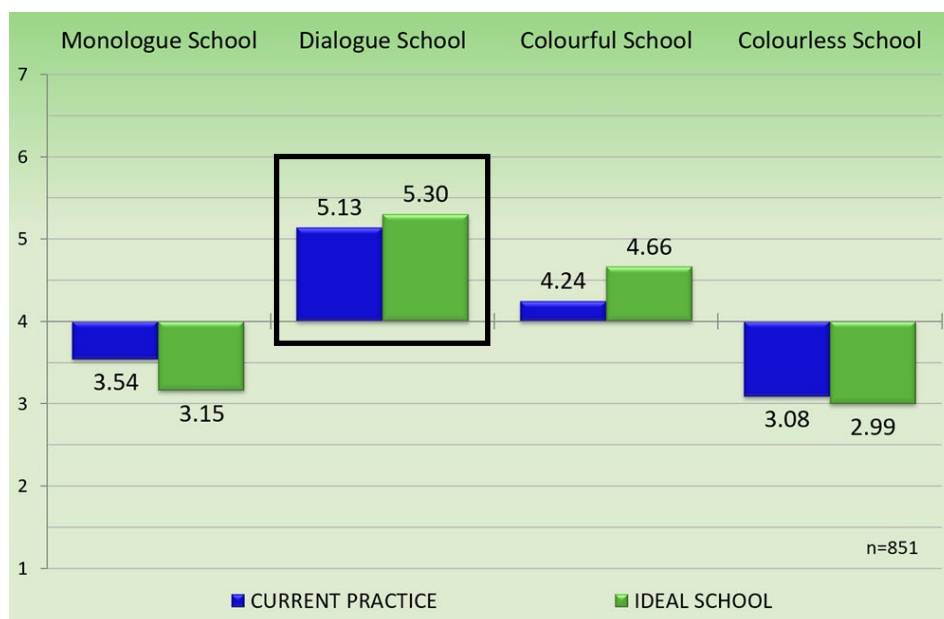


Figure 5a

Victoria Scale mean scores for 851 parents in 46 primary schools and 11 secondary colleges in Melbourne in 2023.

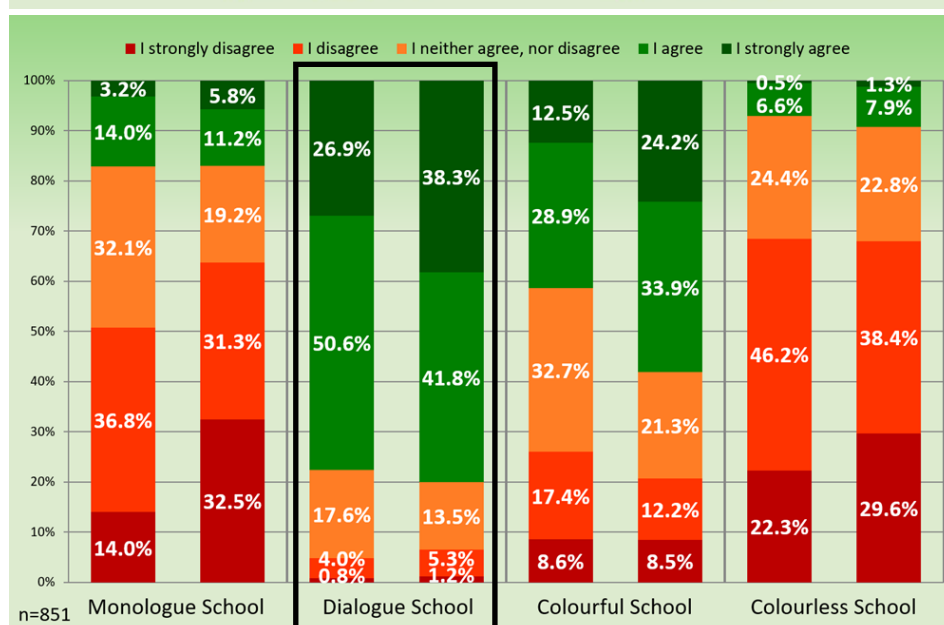


Figure 5b

Victoria Scale percentage breakdowns for 851 parents in 46 primary schools and 11 secondary colleges in Melbourne in 2023.

refer to paragraph 30 of the 2022 instruction of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, titled *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*:

“The Church considers dialogue as a constitutive dimension, as she is rooted precisely in the Trinitarian dynamics of dialogue, in the dialogue between God and human beings and in the dialogue among human beings themselves. Because of its ecclesial nature, the Catholic school shares this element as constitutive of its identity. It must therefore "practice the 'grammar of dialogue', not as a technical expedient, but as a profound way of relating to others". Dialogue combines attention to one's own identity with the understanding of others and respect for diversity.³³

³³ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (January 2022), §30, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html. Internal quote: CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools* (Oct 2013), §57.

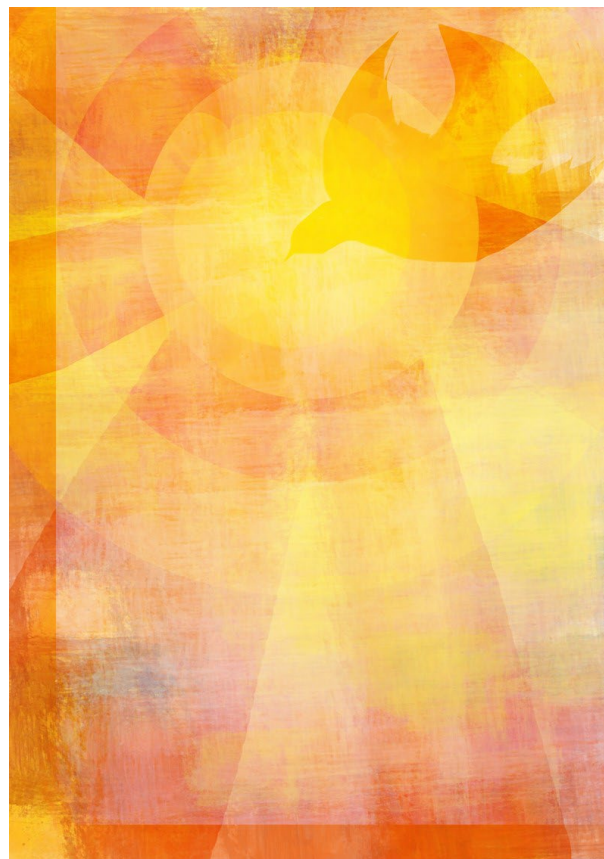
AN INVITATION FOR OUR TIME

On Sunday 29 October 2023 (coincidentally three days before the publication of the *Review*), His Holiness Pope Francis presided over the closing Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican to mark the end of the first session of the *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod*. "We listened to each other and, above all, in the rich diversity of our stories and responsiveness, we listened to the Holy Spirit", he said.³⁴ Subsequently on 1 November 2023 (coincidentally the day of publication of the *Review*), Pope Francis published a new apostolic letter on 'promoting theology' in the future (*Ad Theologiam Promovendam*):

“Do not settle for a desktop theology. Let your place of reflection be the borders. [...] Good theologians, like good pastors, also smell of the people and the street and, by their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of men.³⁵ Openness to the world, to man in the concreteness of his existential situation, with its problems, wounds, challenges, and potential, cannot, however, be reduced to a 'tactical' attitude, extrinsically adapting now-crystallized content to new situations, but must urge theology to an epistemological and methodological rethinking [...].³⁶

Theological reflection is therefore called to a turning point, to a paradigm shift, to a 'courageous cultural revolution' (Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 114) that commits it, first and foremost, to be a fundamentally contextual theology, capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women daily live, in different geographical, social and cultural environments, and having as its archetype the Incarnation of the eternal Logos, its entering into the culture, worldview, and religious tradition of a people. From here, theology cannot but develop into a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and different knowledge, between different Christian denominations and different religions, openly confronting everyone, believers and non-believers alike.³⁷

Promoting theology in the future cannot be limited to abstractly re-proposing formulas and schemes of the past. Called to prophetically interpret the present and glimpse new itineraries for the future in the light of Revelation, theology will have to confront



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³⁴ *Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis, Conclusion of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, St Peter's Basilica, Sunday 29 October 2023*, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2023/documents/20231029-omelia-conclusione-sinodo.html>.

³⁵ *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the 'Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina' for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Faculty of Theology*, (March 2015), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html.

³⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, §4.

profound cultural transformations, aware that: 'What we are living through is not simply an era of change, but a change of epoch'.³⁸

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28 November 2023

On the inauguration of the *Catholic Dialogue School Consortium* in Victoria

Didier Pollefeyt is a Belgian Catholic theologian and full professor at the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven). He obtained his doctoral degree in Theology (S.T.D.) with a dissertation in moral theology (1995) and was appointed professor at the Faculty of Theology in 1998. His research and teaching focuses on multiple topics of intersection: catechetics, methods of religious education, Catholic identity, Catholic schools, interreligious dialogue and peace ethics. He holds the chair of the Centre for Academic Teacher Training in Religion of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, serves as the Director of the Centre for Peace Ethics of KU Leuven, is Director of the Research Group on Enhancing Catholic School Identity, and the supervisor of Thomas (www.godsdienstonderwijs.be), the website for religious education practitioners in Flanders sponsored by the Bishops Conference. Additionally, he also serves as a member of the Belgian National Commission of the Religious Relations with the Jews and as a representative for the Catholic Church in the Council for Jews and Christians in Belgium. Between August 2013 and July 2017, Didier Pollefeyt served as Vice President for Educational Policy at KU Leuven.

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Cover image

MARC CHAGALL (1966), *Abraham and the Three Angels*

³⁸ Ibid., *Motu Proprio Ad Theologiam Tromovendam*, §1. Internal quote: POPE FRANCIS, *Address to the Roman Curia* (21 December 2013), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131221_auguri-curia-romana.html.

IN BRIEF

Authored by Professor Didier Pollefeyt of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven, this paper reaffirms the strength and positive trajectory of our long-standing international partnerships in response to *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*. This response seeks to correct errors and misrepresentations in the *Review's* critique of the theologies and empirical findings of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) research and implementation program led by KU Leuven.

Summary of Key Critiques

At a procedural level, the *Review* failed to consult with those responsible for leading ECSI in Belgium and Australia. This breaches the *Review's* own terms of reference and principles of ethical evaluation, while also ignoring magisterial priorities for dialogue and synodality.

Methodologically, the *Review* characterises ECSI as a sociological and psychological endeavour, ignoring the substantive theological foundations grounded in decades of magisterial teaching on Catholic education.

The *Review* fundamentally misrepresents the Post-Critical Belief (PCB) Scale as developed by Catholic psychologist of religion Dirk Hutsebaut to measure cognitive styles of religious belief, falsely claiming that the purpose of the Scale is to critique Protestant literalism when in fact it distinguishes *four* categories including post-critical belief – a mature form of belief that rejects both literalism and atheism and aligns with a Catholic understanding.

Conceptually, the *Review* relies on numerous errors and false assumptions:

- It erroneously speculates that ECSI blames literalism for the Church's decline in Belgium, when in fact the critical focus of ECSI is centred on the counterproductive over-emphasis of Christian values education and horizontalism.
- It judges ECSI theologians for the crisis of faith in Belgium when Australia faces similar issues of abuse scandals and disaffiliation.
- It claims that Australian theologian Graham Rossiter is critical of ECSI and rather defends reconfessionalisation, thereby misrepresenting Rossiter's work, which actually supports recontextualisation and instead questions neo-catechetical restorationism.
- It rejects ECSI's preferred Catholic Dialogue School identity model as contradicting Catholic self-understanding when Vatican officials explicitly endorse this dialogical approach.
- It discredits ECSI based on faulty assumptions when empirical data shows strong support for ECSI's vision among Melbourne school leadership and parents.

Evaluation and Way Forward

The *Review's* errors and misrepresentations undermine the credibility of its assessment of ECSI. It misconstrues and misrepresents the wide and deep theological foundations of ECSI in magisterial teaching and distorts the empirical data supporting ECSI's effectiveness.

The reconfessionalisation approach favoured by the *Review* risks fuelling further disaffiliation and polarization, and can easily be used by secularists to further undermine Catholic education in Australia.

Following from the above, empirical data show that most Melbourne school stakeholders reject a reconfessionalising vision. As an alternative, the Catholic Dialogue School model is consistent with both magisterial teaching and stakeholder preferences.

While the *Review* quotes statements of Pope Francis on synodality, the reviewers' failure to engage in dialogue contradicts this spirit. The vision outlined in the Pope's recent *motu proprio* (1 November 2023) emphasizes contextual theology, intercultural dialogue, and confronting concrete human realities – all principles at the centre of ECSI.

Overall, the *Review's* criticisms reflect an ideological agenda rather than careful analysis. Efforts to marginalise ECSI based on faulty assumptions will not change the strong grounding of our program in magisterial teaching, empirical findings, and the support among school boards and leadership, staff and parents.

A more constructive path forward involves honest dialogue, resistance to polarising argumentation, and collaboration aimed at renewing the mission and identity of Catholic schools by implementing the Church's vision of authentic contextual encounters.