Catholic Identity 2015 Survey

A Report to the Community Part 5

To complete the picture presented by students, staff and parents concerning Catholic Identity from the surveys in April and May this year respondents were asked questions relating to their attitudes towards religious belief. This model is represented in the graph below. Any individual can have various combinations of attitudes to religions from a literal belief, to a symbolic belief through to the exclusion of any belief in the transcendent.

These attitudes to religion can be categorised as:

1. **Symbolic Belief/Second Naiveté or Post-Critical Belief (the preferred stance in line with the Catholic position and Vatican II)**. This style of belief recognises that God is mystery, never completely contained by limited human language and that a relationship with God is mediated symbolically and sacramentally.

2. **Literal Belief or First Naiveté**. This style of belief is based on the literal interpretation of religious texts and statements.

3. **Literal Disbelief or External Critique**. This style of non-belief is based on literal interpretation of religious texts and statements or on the lack of visible evidence. That is, since texts such as the Bible cannot be taken literal it is to be dismissed. This can lead to an intolerant, anti-religious fundamentalism.

4. **Symbolic Disbelief or Awareness of Contingency (Relativism)**. This style of belief is a recognition that aspects of belief are dependent on their historical situation and therefore contingent. This style of belief also regards religions as interchangeable options, human constructions where belief
in a transcendent God is excluded. This can lead to indifference with no negative or positive feelings towards religions.

The responses by all groups within the College are summarised in the Bar Graph below:

The data for the staff and parents is summarised in the graph below.
The graph above shows that among the adults surveyed at Salesian College there is a mix of attitudes to religion. While there is Literal Belief and External Critique present the dominate attitude to religion is a “symbolical” attitude tending more to “Second Naivité” but there is also an element of “Relativism” present. This means when thinking about God adults in the College community see Him more in a symbolic, mysterious way than a literal way. They understand that the transcendent is mediated through stories, rituals, prayer institutions and traditions. At the same time there is an element of the adult population within the Salesian College community who see religion as symbolic only. Religions for them are interchangeable and there is no personal God.

This Bar Graph allows us to see to what extent these attitude to religion are present within the adult population of the College community. We can see that 125 adults “Agreed” and 29 adults “Completely Agreed” with statement relating to an attitude of symbolic belief (Post-Critical Belief). On the other hand, 138 adults “disagreed” and 8 adults “completely disagreed” with statement relating to literal belief and 126 adults “disagreed” and 11 adults “completely disagreed” with statements relating to non-belief based on a literal interpretation. This confirms an attitude of belief in the school.

However, of concern is the number of adults who “agree” with statements relating to Relativism (100) or “completely agree” (11). This indicated the strong presence of an attitude of indifference or that religions are interchangeable and/or that there is no personal God.
The data for the students is summarised in the graph below:

Like the graph for adults, this graph shows that among the students surveyed at Salesian College there is a mix of attitudes to religion. Like the adults the dominate attitude to religion is “symbolic” but unlike the adults this attitude tends towards “relativism” rather than “second naivite”. Also, of note is the strong tendance towards “literal belief” and “external critique” – there is a stronger “literal” attitude among students than adults. In addition, for students, the tendance towards a “relative” view of religion is much stronger than adults. In other words, students are more black and white, less nuanced than the adults. I would proposes that adults by their nature have had more opportunities to reflect and are less black and white more aware of the symbolic nature of belief. On the other hand, the issues of relativism is a concern. Considering that the majority of our students have been exposed to the Catholic Faith since their early childhood and attended Catholic Primary and Catholic Secondary schools one would hope they would have more than a “Relative” view of Catholicism, that they would not just see it as one religion among many or as equal with other religions.
This Bar Graph above allows us to see to what extent these attitude to religion are present within the student population of the College community. We can see that 446 students “Agreed” or “Completely Agreed” with a symbolic (Post-Critical) attitude to religion while 347 “Completely Disagreed” or “Disagreed”. If so many students disagree with this symbolic view do they believe in a literal way? The answer is “No”. 557 students “Disagree” or “Completely Disagree” with a literal interpretation of belief and of disbelief (External Critique). So where are the students at? By far and away the students’ attitude to religion is one of relativism. 647 students “Agree” or “Completely Agree” with a relativistic attitude to religion. They see religion as a human construct, they are interchangeable and they also may not believe in a personal God.

So, where do this leave us? Where to from here? These results will be used by the College as we reflect and prepare for our official school review conducted by the Catholic Education Office Melbourne in 2016. We will reflect on the fact that to me, these results reflect the pluralistic and secular society we live in – there is much relativism and disbelief. It is our role to facilitate the Catholic Church in Australia’s interaction with this society, to present the Gospel of Jesus, to dialogue, to challenge and to engage our students with this message. Using the charism of Don Bosco (being present with the young), our vision and mission is to help our young people engage the secular and unbelieving society in which they will mature and contribute to for decades to come.