

# COMPARING CATHOLIC AND NON-CATHOLIC STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

## *Some Implications for Understanding of Secularization*

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PRACTICAL theology is deeply interested in the interface between religion and the wider culture. One of the most important aspects of this interaction is how to better understand secularization. To say that we live in a secular culture or that young people are becoming more secular is a very common observation. What is meant by secularization is a weighty and almost inexhaustible topic but in this paper I would like to briefly outline some of the dimensions and implications of secularization *in situ*. What does secularization look like when we examine the responses of young people? I would propose that we need to develop a more nuanced understanding of secularization, one which sees it not as a uniform and inevitable aspect of life today. Rather, secularization is best understood as having its greatest impact in practical lived experience. In this sense it tends to impact across a broad range of groups and certainly religious communities are not immune from the effects of this type of secularizing tendency. As we move away from impact on everyday life then religious ideas re-emerge but these tend to be quite abstract notions with low salience or impact. Salience is a sociological term that refers to how much influence beliefs—in this case religious beliefs—have on how a person lives and what they think. Secular here does not mean hostility or overt anger about religious belief, practice, and commitment. It is just that for an increasing number of people,

and these are by no means just young people, religion has a relatively minor part in shaping what they believe and how they live. There is a very important distinction to be made here between overtly rejecting religion and regarding it, in practice, as having only a small impact of life. The latter position is one that is becoming normative in many cultures and is a good working definition of the process of secularization in many Western post-industrial countries such as Australia.

This understanding of secularization can be seen more clearly if we examine the responses of a selective, differentiated sample of young people. A range of studies have reported on the religious and spiritual lives of contemporary young people.<sup>1</sup> Many of these have examined representative samples in order to make inferences and draw conclusions about national trends.<sup>2</sup> In any representative sample, however, there is recognition that in obtaining normative data, information about subgroups can be lost or obscured. In this paper I will be reporting on research done on one such sub group, namely, students in Catholic schools in Sydney. Catholic schools educate a significant number of people in Australia today.<sup>3</sup> Enrolments are, however, not representative of the wider community even though schools now educate large numbers of non-Catholics. Indeed the enrolment growth in Catholic schools in recent times has been driven largely by non-Catholics. In Sydney

Catholic schools approximately 75% of students identify as Catholic. The non-Catholic enrolment is broken down in the following manner; 10.6% as Orthodox, 4.9% as other Christian, 3.7% as other faith traditions and 5.1% as no religion. These figures indicate that for this population sample around 90% of students identify as Christian. This is a significant finding. Despite changes in the wider community students in Catholic schools exhibit a marked preponderance to professed Christian allegiance. Those with no religious allegiance account for only 5% of enrolments and this is in contrast with the rapid growth of 'nones' in the wider community. This is a widespread phenomenon in Western

countries. In Australia, for example, in 1911 only 0.4% of the population described themselves as having no religious affiliation. By 2011 this figure had increased to 22% and is expected to grow further in coming years.<sup>4</sup>

If we conclude that most students in Catholic schools profess some kind of religious affiliation what can be said about differences or similarities between Catholic and non-Catholic students? A number of areas will be reported on in this paper. The first examines support for Christian beliefs. A statement such as 'I believe that Jesus is truly God and truly man' reflects a dogmatic belief. The same can be said for the statements and responses recorded in Tables 2 and 3.

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/agree (%)	83.9 (88.7)	78.2 (82)	65.6 (70.4)	61.2 (67.4)
Neutral	11.9 (11.3)	14.7 (13)	22.5 (21.4)	25.7 (32.2)
Strongly disagree/disagree	3.8 (3.5)	6.5 (4.5)	11.2 (7.6)	12.8 (8)

**Table 1: Responses to statement: I believe that Jesus is truly God and truly man. (Catholic students only in brackets)**

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/agree (%)	87.9 (88.7)	81.2 (85)	68.7 (73)	64.8 (70.4)
Neutral	8.2 (7.6)	11.7 (10.1)	18.4 (17.7)	21.4 (20.3)
Strongly disagree/disagree	3.8 (3.5)	6.7 (4.5)	12.4 (8.6)	13.5 (8.9)

**Table 2: Responses to statement: I believe that Jesus died and rose again**

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/agree (%)	92.4 (93.6)	86.7 (89.8)	76.6 (80.9)	71.8 (77.6)
Neutral	5.7 (4.9)	9.3 (7.8)	15.3 (14)	17.7 (16.2)
Strongly disagree/disagree	1.7 (1.4)	3.7 (2.3)	7.8 (4.8)	10.2 (6)

**Table 3: Responses to statement: I believe in God**

The three tables above show responses of all students and Catholic students only in brackets. The first finding to note is the decline for both groups over time from what can be seen as traditional Christian views. The largest decline seems to be between Year 7 and Year 9 and this continues into Year 11. It can also be noted that there remains a majority view by students in Catholic schools that supports the dogmatic statement of belief proposed. This is especially so of Catholic students but the figure for all students also supports this conclusion. These findings are in accord with some researchers who have found that belief in dogmatic statements of belief amongst younger Catholics remains high.<sup>5</sup>

Affirmation of dogmatic beliefs can be compared to other responses which probe beliefs of a different nature. If we ask students about topics that have a clearer referent in moral theology a different pattern of responses is evident. In these respondents support of the traditional Christian worldview is not as clear cut. This is in keeping with the view that secularization becomes more evident the closer an issue comes to a person's lived experience. Table 4, for instance, asks about the exclusivity of religious views. The modal response of all students in Catholic schools is that it is OK to pick and choose religious beliefs. There was little difference between Catholic and non-Catholic students.

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/ agree (%)	42.9 (43.2)	44 (42.4)	42.4 (41.6)	46 (46.3)
Neutral	29.1 (29.1)	31.8 (30.6)	31.7 (33)	31.8 (31.9)
Strongly disagree/ disagree	27.8 (27.3)	23.7 (26.1)	25.8 (24.6)	23.7 (21.3)

**Table 4: It's O.K. to pick and choose religious beliefs without having to accept all the teachings of one's religion**

When asked explicitly about morals, Catholic and non-Catholic students responses were again very similar and discordant from what could be seen as a traditional Christian

view. This is also seen in Table 5 which shows a majority of students across all ages agree that morals are personal choices and there are no definite rights or wrongs.

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/ agree (%)	61.6 (62.2)	59 (59.4)	52.7 (62.8)	50.9 (52.4)
Neutral	26.2 (25.9)	31.1 (30.8)	33.6 (33.9)	29.9 (29.5)
Strongly disagree/ disagree	11.6 (11.5)	8.6 (8.5)	13 (12.6)	18.8 (17.7)

**Table 5: Morals are a matter of personal choice because there are no definite rights or wrongs**

The results of Tables 4 and 5 can be interpreted as being reflective of dominant moral cultural norms on moral questions. In

the wider culture the ascent of relativistic views has been well documented.<sup>6</sup> In one well-known categorization the dominant worldview of

young people is described as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).<sup>7</sup> This is a worldview that seeks to minimize difference between all groups in a culture and lends itself very much to relativistic notions of morality. In MTD one of the key principles is to recognize the open ended nature of moral judgements which need to be seen as being reflective of cultural and personal preference. What 'works' for one person may not be applicable elsewhere and a perceived major transgression is to make judgements on actions or decisions. In light of the cultural pressure to conform to these views it is interesting to speculate whether just under 20% of the Year 11 students in Catholic schools in this study disagreeing with the proposition that there are no definite rights or wrongs is a high or unexpected figure.

If we now turn to indicators of praxis or how life is lived we find further evidence of lower religious salience. Table 6, for example, records responses to a very explicit statement about life trajectory. It asks students about how much they try and base their life on the teaching of Jesus. Notice that this is a strong statement. Far stronger, for instance, than one on, say, respecting Jesus teaching. Compared to the results recorded in the first three tables which look at more abstract beliefs, the responses for the tables below show much



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lower levels of religious salience. In addition, there is no consistent difference across the three measures between Catholic and non-Catholic students. Table 7 shows a similar pattern with the majority of students in Catholics schools by Year 11 being neutral or strongly disagreeing with the proposition that religion influences their lives.

	<b>Year 5</b>	<b>Year 7</b>	<b>Year 9</b>	<b>Year 11</b>
<b>Strongly agree/ agree %</b>	<b>70.7 (71.1)</b>	<b>56.3 (58.7)</b>	<b>43.2 (45.5)</b>	<b>46.4 (49.2)</b>
<b>Neutral</b>	<b>28.5 (22.3)</b>	<b>29.5 (29.7)</b>	<b>36.2 (37.4)</b>	<b>32.5 (33.2)</b>
<b>Strongly disagree/ disagree</b>	<b>6.3 (6.0)</b>	<b>13.4 (10.7)</b>	<b>19.6 (16.2)</b>	<b>20.6 (16.6)</b>

**Table 6: I try to base my life on the teaching and example of Jesus.**

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Strongly agree/ agree (%)	68.9 (70.1)	55.9 (57.9)	44.9 (47.1)	47.2 (48.8)
Neutral	21.6 (21.2)	26.0 (26.3)	29.1 (29.6)	28.3 (29.5)
Strongly disagree/ disagree	8.6 (7.9)	16.5 (14.3)	24.5 (21.9)	23.3 (20.5)

**Table 7: Religion influences the way I live my life.**

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
Most important (1), or 2nd most important	72.9 (72.9)	62.4 (63.9)	46.3 (46.1)	40.2 (40.2)
Least important (6) or 5th most important	6.7 (6.3)	14.1 (12)	24 (21.7)	30.1 (26.8)

**Table 8: Consider how each of the following influences your life: God**

If we compare the results shown in Tables 1-3 with those in Tables 6-8 we see the incongruence that often emerges when we examine beliefs against religious salience. For instance, a much higher number of all students agree with the statement that Jesus died and rose from the dead when compared to those who base their lives on the teachings of Jesus. It does seem reasonable to conclude that if you believed that Jesus rose from the dead it would have some impact on how you regarded his teachings and how you lived your life in this light. For this reason measures of religious praxis often give a clearer picture on the impact of religion on the lives of young people than measures of agreement with dogmatic propositions on their own.

Further evidence for a more nuanced view of secularization is seen if we look at measures of religious practise. These, again, can be

seen as markers of salience. If religion is having an impact on how young people live and how they think then this should be reflected in how they behave. A good but by no means the only measure of this is a practise such as prayer. Table 9 shows responses to frequency of prayer by students in Sydney Catholic schools. We can see here again the decline across age levels with frequency of prayer decreasing as students get older. There is a close alignment of practise between Catholic and non-Catholic students with the notable exception that by Year 11 there is a significant difference in the number of students who never prayer. Non Catholic students report a much higher figure for never praying when compared to Catholic students. Given that only approximately 5% of students in Catholic schools in this sample report no religious affiliation the reasons for this difference are worth exploring further.

	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9	Year 11
<b>Each day (%)</b>	<b>53.5 (54)</b>	<b>39.4 (40.6)</b>	<b>33.8 (35.2)</b>	<b>28.2 (30.4)</b>
<b>Regularly</b>	<b>23.4 (24.1)</b>	<b>26.3 (26.7)</b>	<b>21.4 (22.8)</b>	<b>19.8 (21.1)</b>
<b>A Few Times a Year</b>	<b>4.2 (4.1)</b>	<b>7.3 (6.6)</b>	<b>10 (8.9)</b>	<b>13 (12.4)</b>
<b>Never</b>	<b>1.7 (1.4)</b>	<b>4.2 (2.6)</b>	<b>13 (12.4)</b>	<b>12.1 (7.0)</b>

**Table 9: Frequency of prayer**

### Conclusion

It seems, like all good research, the data reported here raise a range of issues for further consideration. There is evidence here for a more nuanced view of secularization. In this view secularisation is seen as a loss of religious salience seen most clearly in a decline in praxis, how people live their lives and the views that they hold that influence this praxis. It seems that most students in Catholic schools agree with many classical statements of dogmatic Christian belief. The trend is away from acceptance of these views as students get older so the longevity of this agreement once students leave school can be questioned. It would seem though that Catholic schools do play a role in maintaining these views, at least while students are attending them. To be sure, significant numbers do not support these positions but these findings challenge the view that students in Catholic schools are heavily in discord over traditional teachings. This, however, does not necessarily lead us to question the impact of secularization on students in Catholic schools. More in accord with the view of secularization taken here, its influence can be seen if we look at other measures.

When we examine more praxis based responses the situation becomes more complex. It seems that for many students in Catholic schools, the impact of religious beliefs on how they live and in what they think is relatively weak and not in accord with

assent to theological positions. This supports the view that religious salience even amongst this sub population of students in Catholic schools is diminishing. A question for further examination is whether or not this decline is in step with wider cultural attitudes. How would students in Catholic schools compare with students in public or independent schools is a question for further study. These results could then be contrasted with control samples which extrapolate to national representation. It may be the religious salience is decreasing amongst students in Catholic schools but this decline may be less significant than for the population of young people as a whole. For the practical theologian the question that is posed here is how best to make the connection between theological propositions and how these are translated into everyday life?

The difference between Catholic and non-Catholic students across all measures is less marked than some may have expected. This is in keeping with the vast majority of students being from a Christian background and only a small percentage having no religious affiliation. Many of the assumptions that are made about non Catholic students in Catholic schools could, on the basis of these findings, be reevaluated. Non Catholic students share many of the views and practises of Catholics and both groups reflect an increasingly secular trend. The secularizing forces on

Catholic and non-Catholic students alike tend to homogenize responses and draw out more similarities than differences. This is in keeping with a view of secularization that sees it as a strong general cultural influence. In this view Catholic students will be just as influenced by the tendency to align their moral views with the normative societal expectations as non-Catholic students. For practical theologians one implication of these findings is that the

differences in outlook of young people in Catholic schools are more likely to be reflective of the wider culture irrespective of religious background. The mechanism of this realignment is a topic that warrants further examination. One key question is how can religious communities have a more formative influence on young people within their communities and what role can Catholic schools play in this process?

## NOTES

1. Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Melbourne: John Garrett Publishing, 2007),
2. William D'Antonio, Michelle Dillon and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
3. *Australian Catholic Schools 2012* (Sydney: National Catholic Education Commission, 2013).
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data 4102.0. Australian Census Data 4102.0 Australian Social Trends, 20/11/13. <http://abs.gov.au/abs@nfs/Lookup/4102.0>
5. William D'Antonio, Michelle Dillon and Mary Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
6. Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Melbourne: John Garrett Publishing, 2007),
7. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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*Just under 4.8 million Australians, or 22 per cent of the population, stated they had no religion on census forms two years ago. The fastest growth was in those aged 15 to 34. The trend is accelerating. In 1911, Australia was unusual in giving its citizens an option of saying they had no religion on census forms. Then just 10,000 people did so, or 0.4 per cent of the population. From 1971 onwards, the bureau notes, those reporting no religion has risen by about 4 percentage points a decade.*

*Is this the onward march of the scientific values of the Enlightenment and a victory for non-believers over the religious? It is not entirely clear.*

*[...] The Social Trends report also notes some characteristics of those who say they have no religion. Nearly half of same-sex couples report no religion, more than twice the rate of the overall Australian population. And for those with a postgraduate degree, 31 per cent reported no religion, compared with one in five people with a high school education.*

—From the Australian Bureau of Statistics website.