The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies

Questionnaire developed by prof. Dirk Hutsebaut, based on the typology of prof. David M. Wulff., about different religious faith attitudes

This empirical instrument is being used for the academic research project
'Enhancing Catholic School Identity'
commissioned by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria, Australia.

Centre of Academic Teacher Training, Faculty of Theology,
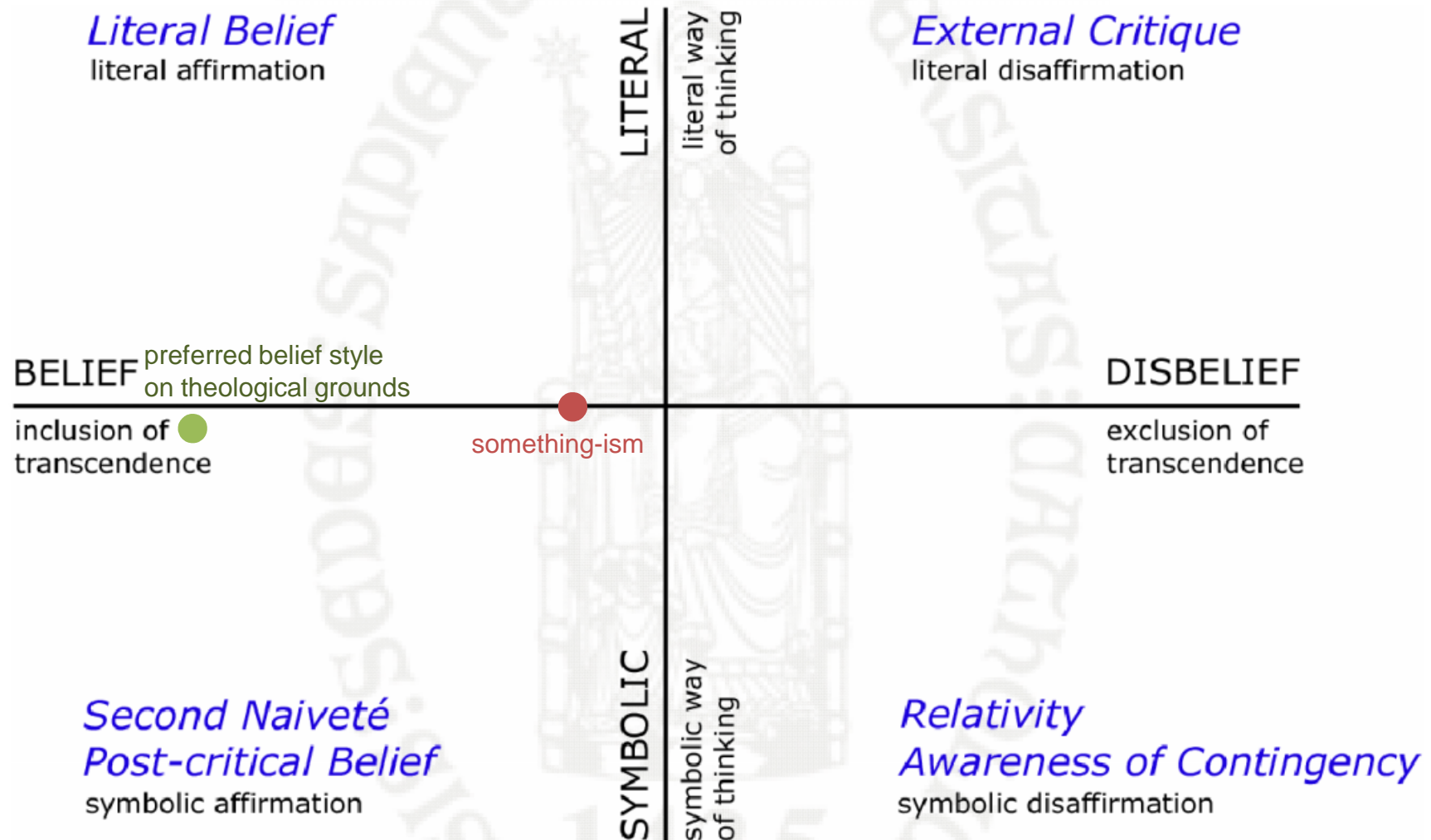K.U. Leuven (© 2009)

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- Designed by the psychologist of religion Prof. Dr. Dirk Hutsebaut, based on the typology of David M. Wulff (professor of psychology in Wheaton College, U.S.A.)

- Typology based on the concept 'second naiveté' / 'post-critical belief' (Paul Ricoeur).

- A two-dimensional typology:
  - ➤ Inclusion vs exclusion of transcendent belief (vertical axis)

    Does someone believe in God, or not? Is there a transcendent God involved in the structure of someone's philosophy of life?
  - ➤ Literal vs symbolic interpretation of religion (horizontal axis)

    The way in which religious content is being experienced and processed: in a literal or symbolical way.

- The specific combination of these four dimensions results in four different options for coping with religious beliefs. Four cognitive religious belief styles / belief attitudes / approaches to religion and faith:
  - o Literal belief / Orthodoxy
  - o Literal disbelief/ External critique
  - o Relativism / Awareness of contingency
  - o Second naiveté / Post-critical belief

Literal Belief
literal affirmation

External Critique
literal disaffirmation

LITERAL — literal way of thinking

BELIEF

preferred belief style
on theological grounds

DISBELIEF

inclusion of
transcendence

something-ism

exclusion of
transcendence

SYMBOLIC — symbolic way of thinking

Second Naiveté
Post-critical Belief
symbolic affirmation

Relativity
Awareness of Contingency
symbolic disaffirmation

Literal belief
literal affirmation of belief contents

- Direct and literal belief in a transcendent God. Literal acceptance of doctrinal belief contents.

- First naiveté: believing in God in a literal way. Believing to have direct and immediate access to the transcendent.

- Bible texts are read and accepted in a literal way. For example: the world was created in exactly seven days, Noah's ark really existed, Gods voice sounded from the blackberry bush, Jesus actually walked over water, the deceased Lazarus came to life again.

- Objectivism: religious metaphors are objectified and taken literally. The literal believer stresses the objectivity of the truth of faith, and desires to protect it against external attacks. For example: burning a candle prior to an exam, making the sign of the cross prior to a penalty kick, praying the rosary for good weather, … and believing that these acts actually influence the course of things, and even attempt to prove it empirically.

- A meritorious aspect of literal belief is the care for the ontological referent of the Christian faith: faith shouldn't dilute to that extent, that belief in God's objective existence would no longer be significant.

- Belief in a personal, immutable God.

- The truth of faith cannot change through time.

- Every faith question can and must have just ONE, exact, certain and unchanging answer.

- A free, subjective interpretation of faith is risky, because interpretation brings uncertainty. It isn't desirable to reflect critically about faith. Faith has priority over critical reason.

- A desire for absolute certainty in matters of faith. Critical questions, doubt and uncertainty are to be avoided. Unsure and anxious when confronted with new, complicating problems.

- Complex faith questions are best avoided.

- Great importance is attached to authority, Church hierarchy and obedience. The content and meaning of faith is derived from (Church) authority.

- Tradition is considered to be very important: things best remain the way they have always been. In a certain sense, this is akin to conservatism.

- In general, the Bible is read in a literal way. However, this needn't necessarily exclude an openness to an (additional) symbolic conscience, even though it isn't dominant and often selective.

- Literal belief often opts for mono-religious learning and a deductive didactics as its basic pedagogical option. Religious education is de jure catechesis.

- Characterized by a strong sense of values and norms. Family values and sexual values are especially considered to be very important.

- Not uncommonly, literal belief can be found in anxious people who desire stability, certainty, safety and familiarity, and who use religion as a way of reducing these fears.

- This religious attitude brings a positive relationship to God, and on the whole it gives a positive feeling of stability and affirmation. For this reason, some people are strongly devoted to a literal belief attitude.

- However, at the same time feelings of anguish and guilt, that find their origin in religion, can cast a shadow on this positive feeling: the spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak...

- Literal belief runs the risk of a rigid, strained way of experiencing faith.

- Literal belief is characterized by a relative intolerance for alternative (religious) positions.

- In extremis we could speak of religious fundamentalism or fanatism.

- NB. In principle, the term 'literal belief' is preferable over the term 'orthodoxy', because the latter could cause problems in the eucumenical meeting. Moreover, it could mistakenly suggest that the other religious attitudes wouldn't be 'orthodox'.

Literal disbelief/ External critique
literal disaffirmation of belief contents

- Destructive criticism on religion and faith from an external position. A straightforward negation of any transcendent reality. In extremis: radical atheism.

- Religious language, statements, testimonies and doctrines are taken literally. But unlike the literal belief coping style, faith is here dismissed because its literal interpretation is, rationally speaking, untenable.

- Bible texts are read literally and are consequently dismissed: many facts from the Bible are untenable when taken as they are, and furthermore mutually contradictory.

- External critique is often akin to a modernist, positive-scientific epistemology.

"Believing in something supernatural is unreasonable. Religions depart from irrational and even inhuman presumptions. Believing is naive and oppressive."

"Virginal conception is a contradiction. A near-death experience is a neurological phenomenon. A conscience isn't God's voice, but an interiorisation of parental authority."

"The theory of evolution proves that the world was not created in 7 days. People cannot turn into salt pillars. Prophesying the future is impossible. No man can walk over water. No dead man can come back to life. The Bible: a book of fairy-tales."

"There's no legitimation to 'believe' something that cannot be empirically verified or rationally deduced. And no-one ever saw God, nor can God's existence be proven in a rational way."

- An external critic can't imagine how to experience and represent reality in a religious way, even if religious beliefs are expressed symbolically.

- He/she rejects certain images of God that he considers to be untenable. Since religious beliefs are taken literally, this critique leads to literal disbelief. (Besides, this doesn't mean that the critiques on certain images of God wouldn't be justified as such – from the perspective of second naiveté – while the inferences that are drawn by external critique could be highly questionable.)

- Familiar with them or not, external critique is alienated from the mythological images and the religious language that are so important in religious texts.

- An external critic emphasizes freedom and personal autonomy, in opposition to the alleged dependance and lack of freedom associated with religious belief. He/she is stressed by the tension between human autonomy and a 'capitulation' to God.

- Literal critique on faith can be an intermediate stage in an evolution from literal to symbolic belief (second naiveté). But external critique could also harden in the deconstruction, without surpassing it. In that case, external critique doesn't evolve into an internal critique of the subject, as is the case with second naiveté.

- Inspired by the 19th century 'masters of suspicion', that put religious beliefs under philosophical critiques: Freud, Marx and Nietzsche.

- Ethics is autonomous and universal, and doesn't require any sort of religious foundation. A specifically Christian ethic doesn't exist, nor would it be needed or desirable.

- The external critic longs for clarity and objective certainty, similar to that found in the positive sciences. He/she is fearful of uncertainty in matters of faith.

- Psychological reduction of faith: people believe in God in order to take away their fears, but this is an illusion. We should learn to live with the harshness of life.

- Religion is mostly associated with negative feelings.

- Ultimately, external critique implies a rather 'empty and dark' world view, that easily inspires fear. To live out this philosophy of life in a sustained and consistent way is demanding and tough.

- Sometimes people fear the fanaticism that some associate with religion. But external critique is fond of a similar urge for certainty and inflexible truth claims. For the same reason, people sometimes fear militant disbelief, as they fear religious fanaticism.

- In extremis we could speak of an intolerant, anti-religious fundamentalism.

Relativism / Awareness of contingency
belief contents are merely relative and contingent

- Religion is approached in a symbolic way, however belief in a transcendent God is excluded.

- Relativists are aware of the symbolic and hermeneutical character of religious beliefs.
  Religious texts and rituals are interpreted symbolically, rather than literally.

- However, there is no belief in a personal God: relativists don't believe in the existence of a transcendent reality 'above' or 'outside' our human world, to which we relate ourselves. Ultimatelty, there's only us.

- Different religions are merely interchangeable options. The one, true religion does not exist. The way I think about belief is only one possibility among so many others.

- Statements about God, testimonies of faith, and Church doctrines are merely relative. They are coloured by the time and the place in which they were pronounced or experienced.

- Religious creeds are always historically determined, and thus contingent. What someone believes as an adult, depends largely on the cultural context in which he/she grew up as a child. Usually this context is accidental; the same is true for religious beliefs and practices.

- Not uncommonly, relativism tries to reduce religious interpretations to non-religious variables. Religions are human constructions that can be reduced (deconstructed) to their psychological, social and cultural determinants. (reductive interpretation, Wulff).

- Different individuals arrive at different interpretations, without one of them being the only 'true' one. Relativists stress the contingency and the relativity of religious beliefs, practices and expressions. According to relativism, they're all merely different paths to the peak(s) of the mountain, without any one path or mountain top being priviledged.

- All religions are 'equally true', ergo 'equally untrue' – ultimately, they are all meaningless.

- Relativists don't reject religious attitudes in an absolute way (as external critique does), but they do relativise them.

- A positive interest in religions remains, sometimes even sympathy or fascination for religious matters.

- Subjectivism: religious contents or metaphors can never be objectified. They have no meaning beyond the interpretation given by the individual. Their meaning is always dependent on the individual, and can never reach beyond the subjective.

- If a relativist reads Bible stories, he reduces them to mere stories, parables with an interesting plot.

- Sometimes relativism can be a (temporary?) position of non-commitment: one refrains from a positive choice for a more definite life view. Options are kept open, choices are postponed, one refuses to engage oneself. (This is a possible explanation why the internal consistency of the relativism-items in the PCB Scale is often relatively low.)

- Relativism is often observed in teens and adolescents who are looking for a personal identity. Sometimes it can be an attempt to rationalise the loss of a naive, childish belief.

- However, it is also conceivable that relativism doesn't disappear when one reaches an adult age, but that is has become a characteristic of a new (dominant?) cultural pattern, in which values like 'respect' and 'tolerance' play a central role. "Every person believes what he/she wants, as long as one respects each other."

- There is no fear of complex faith questions, since they don't threaten the relativist's own life view.

- Relativism often opts for multi-religious learning as its basic pedagogical option (preference for comparative religious sciences).

- A relativist attitude cultivates a great openness and receptiveness for different philosophies of life and religious traditions, as long as there's no pressure or obligation.

- A relativist attitude entails no clear positive nor negative feelings concerning religion.

- In extremis relativism could lead to indifference, non-commitment and lack of solidarity. "All philosophies of life are of equal value, equally unworthy, equally pointless. There is no ultimate meaning, so why bother?"

Second naiveté / Post-critical belief
symbolical affirmation of belief contents

- Characterized by belief in a transcendent God and a religious interpretation of the world. However, the transcendent is not presented in a literal way, but symbolically represented. No literal-objective belief in the third person, but a subjective-interpretative belief in the first person.

- Contact with God never occurs directly, but is always mediated by means of symbols. Second naiveté-belief acknowledges that God is never immediately present, containable, understandable, knowable from face to face. God is the radically different One, who can never be in our power. We stand in a relation to God always through a symbolic representation, through the interpretation of a sign that refers to the uncontainable, the transcendent.

- Only through mediation can people enter into a relationship with the transcendent reality: via stories, rituals, prayer, traditions, institutions, Churches, church offices, social organisations, schools, and so forth. Faith is acquired through our active, creative and interpretative dealing with these mediations. This also means that we always need a faith-community to enter into a relation with God.

- Hermeneutical belief attitude: believing is a continuous process of symbol interpretation, of uncovering new layers of meaning in our symbolical interrelation to God. Believing is only possible and meaningful after interpretation, a process in which critical reason plays a vital role.

- Belief contents and faith attitudes have an historical character and should be construed historically. The Christian tradition continuously develops itself within the context of its point in history.

- Second naiveté is and always will be a transcendent belief style. For an ontological referent is indispensable when symbolically dealing with religion. Talking about God has to refer to something that really exists, because without referent the symbol is empty.

- Post-critical belief (Ricoeur): believing in God, despite critical reasons not to believe. After a restorative reinterpretation, religious contents become meaningful again, despite rational critique. Post-critical believers are well aware of the many critiques that could be raised against religion, but nevertheless they keep holding on to their faith: they choose to remain confident.

- Second naiveté-belief (Ricoeur): the naive literal belief belonging to childhood (first naiveté) is followed by a destructive critique on the sustainability of (literal) belief, which in turn is overcome by a renewed trust, despite possible critiques (second naiveté).

- Restorative faith (Wulff): to arrive at a second naiveté-belief, literal belief needs to be deconstructed and demystified first, and then restored again. This restoration is a hermeneutical process that restores the true meaning of the religious text or message, so that its authentic meaning for the believing subject can become manifest (remembered). Despair turns into confidence once more. Ricoeur speaks of "un combat amoureux de la foi et de la non-foi " ("a passionate battle between belief and non or disbelief") (1971).

- Second naiveté-belief is like a quest that's never complete. Faith has a dimension of a continuous 'being-in-search-for'. Religious faith always remains unfathomable, it keeps a dimension of mystery that can never be penetrated. So religious answers are never definite, final or fixed.

- Reasonably speaking, there is never absolute certainty, consistency, or clarity in matters of faith. Faith truths aren't certain knowledge. Faith = existential trust. So a symbolic style of belief introduces a form of uncertainty, one is prepared to live with. Religious contents and personal creeds can (and should be) put into question, time and again.

- Religious certainty isn't subject to rational conditions or criteria. Belief and science are separate domains of human activity. There is no contradiction between religious faith and rationality. So it is possible to be a believer despite faith critiques, without being irrational.

- According to second naiveté-belief, Bible texts and other religious writings can only be understood and believed after interpretation. The Bible is not an historical report, not a quasi-journalistic account of past happenings, that could be taken literally. The Bible employs mythological, symbolical and religious language. It creates a mythological world through which the story of God with human beings is told. So, reading the Bible requires interpretation, deciphering, translation: the second naiveté believer attempts to distinguish between the Bible's mythological imagery and the religious message for us, living here and now. Despite the fact that the Bible was written in an historical context that is far removed from our own, the Scriptures maintain a religious message that is relevant for us. For example: the literal believing person assumes that Jesus literally walked over the lake. The second naiveté-believer on the other hand is aware that the evangelist through the gospel story attempted to stress the special, divine nature of Jesus Christ by means of the available narrative patterns of his time.

- Likewise, the sacraments should be symbolically interpreted instead of taken literally. The ritual / sacramental event becomes transparant to 'the other world', from which God breaks though.

- A second naiveté-believer is prepared for re-interpretation, and hence is open for change. He/she recognises that every religious standpoint (including his/her own) is historically situated, embedded in a concrete-personal context, and consequently changeable. Meaning can be construed and expressed in more than one way, depending on the time and the place symbolical language is employed.

- There is a receptiveness for complex faith questions that nourish the hermeneutical process.

- A second naiveté-believer acknowledges that there are many ways to deal with religious questions. So he/she cherishes an openness and receptiveness towards other religious perspectives and practices.
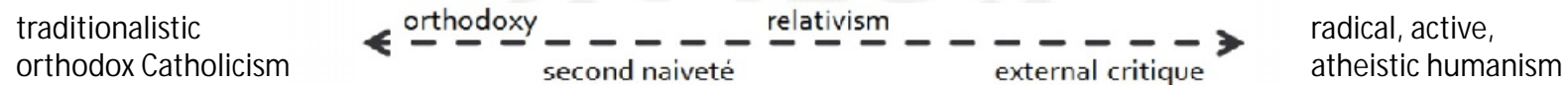
- A second naiveté-belief opts for an inter-religious learning and an inductive didactics as its basic pedagogical option.

- According to Wulff, referring to Ricoeur, second naiveté is the most mature belief style, that probable is best suited for modern society and culture. Moreover, Wulff links second naiveté with the fifth stage in the faith-development model of James W. Fowler, namely conjunctive faith (1981)*.

- This belief style is associated with positive feelings concerning religion.

- The attitude of second naiveté should not be exclusively linked to the Christian religion. This coping style can, in principle, be found in any religion with a transcendent belief structure, not only in Christianity.

- Because of the hermeneutical nuances and uncertainty, second naiveté is a rather complex and also vulnerable faith position: a continuous searching-for without the promise of a final resting point, no certainty apart from the confidence of faith. We, positive-scientifically minded people, sometimes experience difficulty with a truth claim in the first person, without one, clear, fixed and directly fathomable meaning.

- Moreover, second naiveté is put under pressure, both by literal belief (that misconstrues it as relativism, a dilution of literal faith), as by external critique and relativism (that both suspect it to be disguised orthodoxy)…

- In extremis this belief style could degenerate into a 'religious' attitude with a very general and non-specific content without a clear point of reference, in which any interpretation is possible.

*J. W. FOWLER, Stages of Faith. The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1981.
   (0) Undifferentiated faith, (1) Intuitive-Projective Faith, (2) Mythic-Literal Faith, (3) Synthetic-Conventional Faith,
   (4) Individuative-Reflective Faith, (5) Conjunctive faith, (6) Universalizing Faith.

General remarks about the four religious attitudes

- A typological scale: The belief attitudes described above are idealized types: they are extreme positions in a continuum with numerous intermediate positions and mixed types.

- No personality types: Literal belief, external critique, relativism and second naiveté are styles of religious belief, NOT 'religious personality types'. They are characteristic patterns of dealing with religious beliefs; cognitive perspectives that people can adopt to cope with religious faith. Apart from some partial (and unstable) correlations, there seems to be no connection between the religious attitudes of the PCB-typology and certain personality types.

- Religious attitudes aren't exclusive: These four belief styles are not mutually exclusive. One and the same person can show traits of multiple belief styles, depending on the subject at hand, the moment in time, or the situation that person is in. Likewise there can be tendencies of multiple religious attitudes at work within the same population. The aim of the PCB Scale is to map the presence and the mutual relations of the four religious coping styles within an individual or a population as a whole. The aim is not to divide a population into four groups of religious personalities.

- Combination of two dimensions: The PCB scale disentangles the effects of being religious or not (inclusion vs exclusion of transcendence) from the way in which religion and religious contents are processed (literally vs symbolically). Because of this, it is able to investigate the influence of both dimensions independently of each other, which has led to some remarkable research discoveries in the past.

- Underlying secularisation paradigm: The decline of religious belief in Western societies in recent decennia is interpreted from the linear opposition between two extremes and all the nuances in between:

traditionalistic
orthodox Catholicism

⟵ - - - orthodoxy - - - - - relativism - - - - - - - - - - ⟶
            second naiveté   external critique

radical, active,
atheistic humanism

- **Something-ism**: The most minimalistic form of inclusion of transcendence. It is situated just inside transcendent belief, on the boundary between literal belief and second naiveté. Something-ists feel themselves vaguely attracted to transcendent patterns of meaning, but without being able (or willing) to describe this 'something' more concretely. Moreover, it is problematic to enter into a relationship with a 'something'. Something-ism is a comfortable middle-position, a compromise between an evasion of the harsh consequences of external critique on the one hand, and an unspecified desire for a transcendent structure of meaning on the other.

- **Preferred belief style on theological grounds**: Prof. D. Pollefeyt's normative viewpoint based on theological arguments. Situated far inside transcendent belief (the inclusion of transcendence is maximal), in the quadrant of second naiveté, just below the boundary with literal belief (though never touching it). This is the symbolic position where the ontological referent is present the most, without ever being presented directly. The authentic believer tries to build a relationship with God as intensely as possible, but continuously withstands the temptation to cross the boundary, to grasp God. He's standing in the fullest mediation between God and man. Here, believing is an ongoing process of symbol interpretation, whereby God never allows himself to be presented directly, but breaks through from 'the other side'.

- The discussion between a literal and a symbolic interpretation of religious beliefs is as old as humanity itself. During its entire history, Christianity has struggled with the symbolic interpretation of Jesus' message. Now it is up to us to continue this struggle.

- Literal belief and external critique have in common: a desire for immediate and absolute certainty. But while the former finds this certainty in a literal acceptance of doctrines, the latter finds it in a destructive criticism on literal beliefs.

- Literal belief and external critique have in common: religion reduces anxiety. But while the former accepts this religious comfort, the latter dismisses it as an illusion.

- Making the transition from literal belief to second naiveté is easier, than the transition from relativism to second naiveté. For a literal believer is a believer already. Having a non-believer adopt faith in God, is much more difficult: faith cannot be made; it is a being touched in grace by an 'other reality'. On the other hand, the fact that a relativist is already dealing with religious content in a symbolic way, facilitates the transition from relativism to second naiveté.

- Usually, courses of Catholic religious education in Flemish schools are caught in the dynamic between relativism (that scores high among students) and second naiveté (the ambition of the course). If teachers, while being engaged in a dialogue with plurality, hesitate to talk about God and the Christian faith explicitly, then religious education in schools risks getting stuck within a relativistic discourse.

- Curiously enough, the media all too often take the stand of external critique (despite the fact that research reveals that this does not reflect the dominant religious attitudes amongst the population). Perhaps by doing so the media are attempting to be neutral, objective, and critical. However, external critique is not at all neutral nor free of values; it is a standpoint like any other.

- Believing parents are often tempted to raise their children with a literal belief: believing in God like believing in Santa Claus. They presume that their children – through a necessary crisis – will deepen their faith in a symbolic direction at a later age. Perhaps it is wiser – theologically speaking – to have children participate in the symbolic faith attitude of adults from an early age? Are children already able to personally integrate a symbolic religious coping style? Is this a legitimate educational approach, pedagogically speaking?

Empirical operationalilsation: the PCB Scale

- The Post-Critical Belief Scale (PCB Scale) is an empirical instrument in the form of a questionnaire, based on this typology. It aims to measure by means of a sample the degree to which the different religious attitudes are present in a population. It maps the tendencies of different approaches to religious belief that are present within a population, in their mutual relationships.

- The PCB Scale doesn't aim to measure whether people believe or not, nor the depth of their faith, but it maps their attitude(s) towards religious beliefs.

- Contrary to the Melbourne Scale and the Victoria Scale, the PCB Scale does NOT use a double measurement level. So there is no division into a factual and a normative level.

- There are two versions of the PCB Scale:

   1. The teens' questionnaire (from 10 to 16 years): 32 items, to be scored using a 7-point Likert Scale.

      Designed in the context of the PWO research project Empirical Investigation into the Religious Development of Children aged 10 to 15 in a Plural Societal Context, a collaboration between KHKempen and the Centre of Academic Teacher Training of the Faculty of Theology, K.U. Leuven. This scale consists of eight categories that contain four items each, representing the four religious coping styles: (1) Does God exist? (2) Proofs of God's existence. (3) Your relationship with God. (4) Coming closer to God? (5) Stories about Jesus and his miracles. (6) About praying. (7) Sometimes bad things happen in the world… (8) Life after death. + 4 evaluation questions.

   2. The adults' questionnaire: 33 items, to be scored using a 7-point Likert Scale.

      Designed by Prof. Dr. Dirk Hutsebaut. Eight to nine items per religious attitude, about various subject matters, selected based on empirical trials + 4 evaluation questions.

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