

Peter John McGregor

Catholic Institute of Sydney, Australia
pmcgregor@cis.catholic.edu.au
ORCID: 0000-0002-1811-0043

From Ricoeur to Wulff to Hutsebaut: The Development of the Post-Critical Belief Scale

Od Ricoëura, przez Wulffa, do Hutsebauta:
rozwój Skali Przekonań Postkrytycznych

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this essay is to explain and critique the development of the Post-Critical Belief Scale (PCBS), which is employed in the implementation of the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project in various countries. The rationale behind the project is that, in a secularized and pluralistic society, the optimal option for a Catholic is to have a post-critical faith. The PCBS is a diagnostic tool used by the project to assess the Catholic identity of staff and students in Catholic schools. The first part of the essay presents the PCBS, with its categories of literal belief, literal disbelief, relativism, and post-critical belief. It then explains the importance of Paul Ricoeur's concepts of second naïveté, symbol, demystification, and demythologization for the development of the PCBS. Next, it looks at how David Wulff adopts and adapts Ricoeur's ideas to develop a heuristic schema of views in the psychology of religion. Following this, it shows how Dirk Hutsebaut uses Wulff's schema as a basis for developing the PCBS. Then it presents some serious problems in the PCBS, focusing specifically on its categories of relativism and post-critical belief (second naïveté). This is followed by a brief reiteration of six fundamental flaws revealed in the analysis of the PCBS: 1) Ricoeur's understanding of false consciousness and 2) demythologization, 3) Wulff's Protestant assumptions about biblical hermeneutics, 4) the partial rather than full adoption of Ricoeur's schema by Wulff and Wulff's schema by Hutsebaut, 5) the different and incommensurate perspectives of Ricoeur, Wulff, and Hutsebaut, and 6) the universalization of personal experience by Ricoeur, Wulff, and Hutsebaut. The essay concludes by presenting the fundamental theological flaw of the PCBS, its inability to distinguish between natural faith and supernatural faith, caused by its lack of any theology of grace.

KEYWORDS: Post-Critical Belief Scale, Post-Critical Belief, Paul Ricœur, David Wulff, Dirk Hutsebaut, Enhancing Catholic School Identity, ECSI, second naïveté, symbol, demythologization

ABSTRAKT: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wyjaśnienie i krytyczna analiza procesu opracowania Skali Przekonań Postkrytycznych (PCBS), wykorzystywanej w ramach projektu „Wzmacnianie tożsamości szkół katolickich” (ECSI) w różnych krajach. Projekt ten opiera się na założeniu, że w zsekularyzowanym i pluralistycznym społeczeństwie optymalnym rozwiązaniem dla katolika jest wiara postkrytyczna. Skala PCBS jest narzędziem diagnostycznym wykorzystywanym w ramach projektu do oceny tożsamości katolickiej kadry i uczniów szkół katolickich. W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawiono skalę PCBS wraz z jej kategoriami: wiarą dosłowną (literalną afirmacją / ortodoksją [*orthodoxy*]), niewiarą dosłowną (literalnym zaprzeczeniem / krytyką zewnętrzną), relatywizmem (symbolicznym zaprzeczeniem / świadomością kontyngencji) oraz wiarą postkrytyczną (wtórną naiwnością). Następnie wyjaśniono znaczenie pojęć Paula Ricœura – wtórnej naiwności, symbolu, demistyfikacji i demitologizacji – dla opracowania skali PCBS. W dalszej kolejności artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób David Wulff przyjmuje i adaptuje idee Ricœura w celu opracowania heurystycznego schematu poglądów w psychologii religii. Następnie pokazuje, jak Dirk Hutsebaut wykorzystuje schemat Wulffa jako podstawę do opracowania PCBS. Dalej artykuł przedstawia kilka poważnych problemów związanych z PCBS, skupiając się w szczególności na kategoriach relatywizmu i wiary postkrytycznej (wtórnej naiwności). Po tym następuje krótkie podsumowanie sześciu fundamentalnych wad ujawnionych w analizie PCBS: 1) rozumienie przez Ricœura fałszywej świadomości, 2) demitologizacja, 3) protestanckie założenia Wulffa dotyczące hermeneutyki biblijnej, 4) częściowe, a nie pełne przyjęcie schematu Ricœura przez Wulffa oraz schematu Wulffa przez Hutsebauta, 5) odmienne i nieporównywalne perspektywy Ricœur, Wulffa i Hutsebauta oraz 6) uniwersalizacja osobistego doświadczenia przez Ricœur, Wulffa i Hutsebauta. Artykuł kończy się przedstawieniem fundamentalnej wady teologicznej PCBS: niemożności rozróżnienia między wiarą naturalną a wiarą nadprzyrodzoną, spowodowanej brakiem jakiegokolwiek teologii łaski.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Skala Przekonań Postkrytycznych (PCBS), wiara postkrytyczna, Paul Ricœur, David Wulff, Dirk Hutsebaut, wzmacnianie tożsamości szkół katolickich, ECSI, wtórna naiwność, symbol, demitologizacja

In 2006, Didier Pollefeyt, from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, together with the Catholic Education Commission of the state of Victoria in Australia, began developing the Enhancing Catholic School Identity (ECSI) project. First implemented in the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne in 2011, this project is now employed in eleven other Australian dioceses, as well as dioceses in Belgium. Pilots of the project have been implemented in the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States.¹ Some investigations about the validity of the PCBS have been undertaken in Poland.²

Yet after 12 years of employing this project designed to improve the Catholic identity of its schools, in 2023 the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne accepted the recommendation of a review of the religious education curriculum in its schools to abandon the project. The following reasons were given for this recommendation:

first, that it is ill-suited to the purpose of understanding and promoting Catholic identity; second, that rather than assist in the task, it has hindered it; third, that it is an obstacle to the work of promoting the Catholicity of “Catholic” schools and fourth, it is an impediment to the development of an effective form of religious education within them.³

A full analysis and critique of the ECSI that would reveal the reasons for its abandonment by its “flagship” diocese is beyond the scope of this essay.⁴ Instead, it will be limited to analysing and critiquing the development of one of the three diagnostic tools used by the project to assess the Catholic identity of a Catholic

¹ Robyn Horner, “Enhancing Catholic School Identity: A Response to Peter McGregor,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2023): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231160385>.

² See Jacek Śliwak and Beata Zarzycka, “The Interplay Between Post-Critical Beliefs and Anxiety: An Exploratory Study in a Polish Sample,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2012): 419–30, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9367-2>; Rafał P. Bartczuk et al., “The Internal Structure of the Polish Adaption of the Post-Critical Belief Scale,” *Roczniki Psychologiczne* 16, no. 3 (2013): 563–85; Beata Zarzycka and Elżbieta Rydz, “Explaining the Relationship Between Post-Critical Beliefs and Sense of Coherence in Polish Young, Middle, and Late Adults,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 53 (2014): 834–48; Beata Zarzycka et al., “Centrality of Religiosity Scale in Polish Research: A Curvilinear Mechanism that Explains the Categories of Centrality of Religiosity,” *Religions* 11, no. 2: 64 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020064>; and Piotr Szydłowski et al., “The structure of the attitudes toward religion as measured by the Post-Critical Belief Scale: A structural modelling approach,” *Current Psychology* 42, no. 5 (2021): 10792–803, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02367-2>.

³ Natina Giacco et al., *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (November 2023), <https://www.macs.vic.edu.au/MelbourneArchdioceseCatholicSchools/media/Documentation/Documents/RE-Curriculum-Review-Report.pdf>, 26.

⁴ For critiques of the ECSI project and its philosophical and theological principles, see Gerard O’Shea, “Vulgarised Rahnerianism and Post-Critical Recontextualisation: Solvents of Catholic Identity in Contemporary Catechesis,” *Studia Elckie* 16, no. 3 (2014): 341–73; Peter John McGregor, “The Leuven Project: Enhancing Catholic School Identity?” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2022): 106–30, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400221078904>; and Peter John McGregor, “Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Shedding More Light,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2024): 20–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231213405>.

school. This tool is called the Post-Critical Belief Scale (PCBS). This essay will begin with an analysis of the PCBS, presenting what it means by “literal belief,” “literal disbelief,” “relativism,” and “post-critical belief”. Then its development will be tracked, beginning with the thought of Paul Ricœur on the nature of symbolism, demystification, demythologization, and second naïveté. This will be followed by an analysis and critique of how these concepts are selectively adopted and adapted by the psychologist of religion, David Wulff, to develop a heuristic model of four religious attitudes: literal belief, external critique, reductive interpretation, and restorative interpretation. After this, the essay will analyse and critique how another psychologist of religion, Dirk Hutsebaut, adopts and modifies Wulff’s model to develop the PCBS. At the end of this examination of the changes that Hutsebaut makes to Wulff’s model, the essay will focus on problems in Hutsebaut’s categories of relativism and post-critical belief. It will conclude with a brief overview of the fundamental flaws of the project, with the deepest flaw being a lack of any theology of grace.

1. The Post-Critical Belief Scale

The theoretical foundations of the PCBS lie substantially in the philosophy of religion of Ricœur, and the psychology of religion of Wulff, adopted and adapted by Hutsebaut. Pollefeyt uses Hutsebaut’s PCBS to assess the Catholic identity of staff and students in Catholic schools. The PCBS plots responses to 33 statements about beliefs on a Cartesian plane.⁵ One axis plots the kind of belief: “literal” at one end and “symbolic” at the other. The second axis plots the presence or absence of belief: “inclusion of transcendence” at one end and “exclusion of transcendence” at the other. The ideal Catholic is one who has what is called a “post-critical belief,” a term taken from Ricœur, that combines “inclusion of transcendence” with “symbolic belief”. The yellow dot in the diagram below represents the optimal position for such a believer. As Pollefeyt puts it: “Post-critical Belief stands for a symbolic affirmation of faith contents. It is characterised by faith in a transcendent God and in a religious interpretation of reality in which the transcendent is not considered literally present but is represented symbolically.”⁶

⁵ For the survey, see “The Post-Critical Belief Scale.” A copy of the survey statements can be found by searching online for “KU Leuven Post-Critical Belief Scale”. The PCBS had twenty-four statements, but its final iteration has thirty-three.

⁶ Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an education institute,”

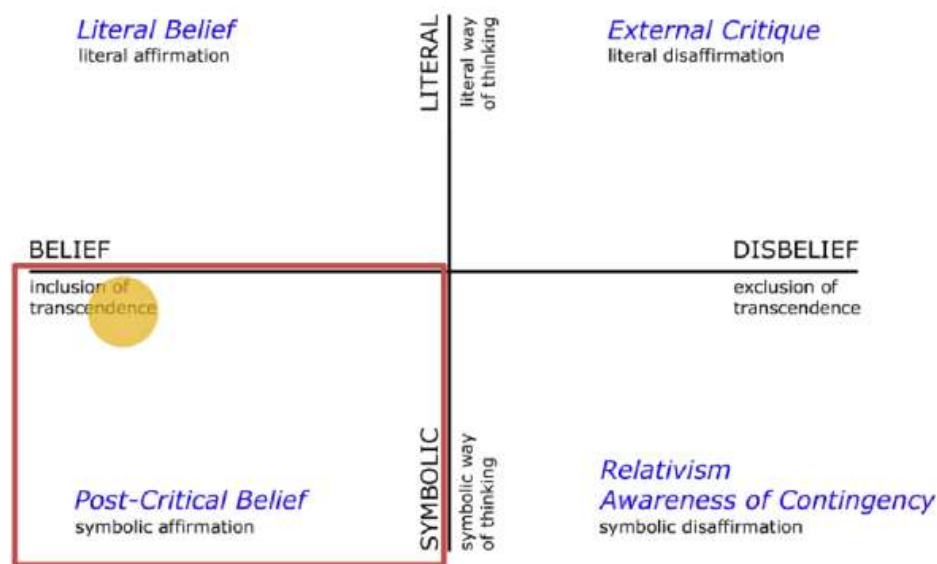


Figure 1. “Post-Critical Belief Scale, with added emphasis (in red outline) on the type of post-critical belief at the intersection of affirmation of transcendence and symbolic ways of thinking.”⁷

As seen above, each quadrant of the plane contains what Pollefeyt calls “Four cognitive religious belief styles/belief attitudes/approaches to religion and faith.” The four are named 1) “literal belief,” also called “orthodoxy,” 2) “external critique,” also called “literal disbelief,” 3) “relativism” or “relativity,” also called “awareness of contingency,” and 4) “second naïveté,” also called “post-critical belief”.⁸

International Studies in Catholic Education 2 (2010): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2010.504034>.

⁷ Didier Pollefeyt, “ECSI @ KU LEUVEN: A response to *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*,” 28 November 2023, <https://ecsi.site/au/response-to-review-religious-education-curriculum-catholic-schools-melbourne/>, 6. No pagination is given in the document, but when printed it is composed of 17 pages.

⁸ Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, “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,” Centre of Academic Teacher Training, Faculty of Theology, K.U. Leuven, 2009, <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2019/03/4.-Pollefeyt-Bouwens-PCB-Melb-Vict-for-dummies-EN.pdf>, 2–3. No pagination is given in the document, but when printed it is composed of 18 pages. Despite its self-effacing title, it reads like a professional development document.

On the question of what kind of belief should be encouraged amongst students and staff at a Catholic school, Pollefeyt says,

We openly acknowledge that the Post-critical belief type is the faith style promoted at the Centre for Academic Teacher Training of our Faculty of Theology. . . . Based on theological arguments and empirical research results, we defend that a symbolic style of faith is the most fruitful for the identity of Catholic schools in a pluralising society, today and tomorrow.⁹

1.1. Literal Belief

The term “literal belief” stands for “a literal affirmation of doctrinal belief contents”.¹⁰ It is also referred to as “first naïveté” and “orthodoxy”.¹¹ A Catholic with a “literal” style of belief believes in a God, a transcendent reality, to whom one can have “immediate access”. Such a person thinks it both possible and desirable to be present to God in an “unmediated [way]. . . to meet Him directly in words and rituals”.¹² For literal-style Catholics, “Religious metaphors and truths of faith are objectified and interpreted literally. Biblical texts are mostly read literally and just accepted”.¹³ The truths of this faith cannot change over time. “Every faith question can and must have just ONE, exact, certain and unchanging answer.”¹⁴ For the literal believer, faith has priority over “critical reason”. Doubt, uncertainty, and “complex faith questions” are to be avoided, because a “subjective, critical faith interpretation is risky since interpretation results in uncertainty and doubt”.¹⁵ Literal-style believers are “often uncertain and afraid of new, complicating problems and, therefore, [desirous of] absolute certainty on matters of faith”.¹⁶ They attach great importance to obedience to Church authority, from whence the content and meaning of faith is derived. To them, tradition is important. However, literal believers can be intolerant of alternative religious positions and, in the most extreme cases, can be religious

⁹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 197.

¹⁰ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

¹¹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 2.

¹² Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

¹³ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

¹⁴ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 4. Capitalization in the original.

¹⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

¹⁶ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

fundamentalists.¹⁷ In essence, people with a literal style of belief cannot distinguish between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning.

1.2. Literal Disbelief

The term “literal disbelief” identifies those who have rejected literal belief in “belief contents”.¹⁸ This is also called “external critique”. These disbelievers reject the “first naïveté” of literal belief, including a belief in a transcendent reality, as irrational. As with literal belief, Bible texts are still interpreted “literally,” but are rejected on this basis. As Pollefeyt explains, “Literal disbelief is often framed in a modernistic, positivistic-scientific epistemology.”¹⁹ Like literal believers, these literal disbelievers desire the same “clarity and objective certainty” which they find in the positive sciences.²⁰ However, the “critical reason” of these unbelievers can lead them to reject the possibility of “symbolic awareness”.²¹ These disbelievers are “alienated from the mythological images and the religious language that are so important in religious texts”.²² Their “literal critique” of faith can be a stage on the way from literal to symbolic belief, but it can “also harden in the deconstruction, without surpassing it”.²³ Like people who are literal believers, people who are literal disbelievers cannot distinguish between literal meaning and metaphorical meaning.

1.3. Relativism

The third quadrant includes the “relativists”. Relativism is also called “awareness of contingency”. These people “are thoroughly aware of the symbolic and hermeneutical nature of religious faith”.²⁴ They have passed from the literalism of both literal believers and disbelievers, into the realization that belief must be approached “symbolically”. However, relativists do not believe in a transcendent reality such as God. For them, all religions are “interchangeable, human

¹⁷ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 5.

¹⁸ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

¹⁹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

²⁰ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

²¹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

²² Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 6.

²³ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 7.

²⁴ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

constructions”.²⁵ All religions are historically determined. The religion that a person holds is an accident of their familial and cultural context. Often, “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.”²⁶ For relativists, all religions are equal in the sense that none of them is objectively true. For them, “religious contents or metaphors can never be objectified. Their meaning is always dependent on the individual, and can never reach beyond the subjective.”²⁷ Yet they retain a positive attitude to religions because of their symbolic nature.²⁸ Relativists often inhabit a kind of limbo in relation to religion, choosing neither for nor against it.²⁹ They are “post-critical,” but not “believers”.

1.4. Post-Critical Belief

Finally, we come to the last quadrant. Pollefeyt wishes to bring Catholics to a “post-critical belief”, also called, with a term also borrowed from Ricœur, a “second naïveté”. This is a faith which has moved beyond not only “literal belief” but also beyond a critical “literal disbelief”, which rejects a literal affirmation of doctrinal belief contents, and a post-critical relativism, which accepts “a symbolic approach to religiosity but without belief in a transcendent reality”.³⁰ Such a faith accepts the existence of a transcendent God. However, “the transcendent is not presented in a literal way, but *symbolically* represented.”³¹ For the post-critical believer,

Contact with God never occurs directly, but is always mediated by means of symbols. Second naïveté-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 relation to

²⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

²⁶ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 8.

²⁷ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 9.

²⁸ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 9; Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

²⁹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

³⁰ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 196.

³¹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 10. Italics in original.

God always through a symbolic representation, through the interpretation of a sign that refers to the uncontainable, the transcendent.³²

As Pollefeyt explains, "People relate to the transcendent reality through mediations only: through stories, rituals, traditions, institutions, churches, ministries, communities, social organisations, and so forth. Faith is acquired through the active, creative, and interpretive handling of these mediations."³³ The communal nature of these mediations "means that we always need a faith-community to enter a relationship with God".³⁴ For Pollefeyt, "to believe is a continuous process of symbol-interpretation; the revelation of new layers of significance in the symbolic relationship with God. To believe is only possible and meaningful after interpretation."³⁵ Yet this interpretation must be done according to "critical reason", "so that we do not believe in nonsense against our better judgement. The Bible is written in a specific historical context and employs (sometimes obsolete) mythological, symbolic, and religious language, in which the story of God with human beings is told."³⁶ So, the Bible does not mean what it seems to be saying to literal-minded believers, for example, that Jesus truly walked on water. Rather, the post-critical believer "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".³⁷ As Pollefeyt explains,

To read the Bible, then, requires interpretation, deciphering, translation: the post-critical believer tries to distinguish the mythological images from the religious message for us, alive in the here and now. The term 'post-critical faith' refers to well-considered faith in God despite critical reasons not to believe. After a renewed interpretation, religious contents become meaningful again. Destructive criticism on the literal understanding of faith is surmounted by a renewed faith understanding that lasts despite the ongoing possibility of rational critique.³⁸

³² Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 10.

³³ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools," 197.

³⁴ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 10.

³⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools," 197.

³⁶ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools," 197.

³⁷ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 12.

³⁸ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools," 197.

Post-critical belief is what Pollefeyt calls “a *transcendent* belief style” which must have what he calls “an *ontological referent*”.³⁹ By this, he means that what is believed in is not a metaphor. Rather, there is something that is believed. Otherwise, the symbol is “empty”.⁴⁰ According to Pollefeyt, post-critical faith is an ongoing task. It is

a continuous “searching for” religious significance and meaning without ever finding a final, absolute, established, and certain answer. Symbolic believers live with the existential tension between uncertainty and trust. They feel called to question constantly the religious contents and personal convictions from which they live. They are prepared for reinterpretation, are open to change, and are receptive of complex faith questions that feed the hermeneutical process. . . . Because of the hermeneutical nuances and the continuous “searching for”, Post-critical Belief is a complex and vulnerable faith position.⁴¹

According to Pollefeyt, “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.”⁴² Faith in God is never certain: “Faith truths aren’t certain knowledge. Faith = existential trust.”⁴³ This is because, “Religious certainty isn’t subject to rational conditions or criteria. Belief and science are separate domains of human activity.”⁴⁴ However, by this Pollefeyt does not mean that post-critical belief is irrational. Rather, we could say that it is a-rational: “There is no contradiction between religious faith and rationality. So it is possible to be a believer despite faith critiques, without being irrational.”⁴⁵ What applies to faith also applies to sacraments. Hence, “the sacraments should be symbolically interpreted instead of taken literally. The ritual/sacramental event becomes transparent to ‘the other world’, from which God breaks through.”⁴⁶

³⁹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 10. Italics in original.

⁴⁰ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 10. Italics in original.

⁴¹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 197.

⁴² Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 11.

⁴³ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 11.

⁴⁴ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 11.

⁴⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 12.

⁴⁶ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies,” 12.

2. The Importance of Ricœur for the Post-Critical Belief Scale

Before critiquing the development of the PCBS, we must first comprehend the importance that Hutsebaut attaches to certain aspects of the philosophy of Ricœur, whose concept of second naïveté has been included in the PCBS through the mediation of Wulff. Besides drawing upon Ricœur, Wulff also draws on the work of James Fowler, who uses Ricœur's concept of second naïveté to elucidate his fifth and penultimate stage of faith, which he calls "conjunctive" faith.⁴⁷ People at this stage acknowledge that there are paradoxes and the mysteries regarding their belief in the transcendent. Such people can move beyond the conventional religious traditions or beliefs that they may have held during previous stages of their faith development. They can resolve the conflicts revealed by the paradoxes and mysteries of faith in the transcendent via a multi-dimensional perspective that acknowledges that "truth" is something that cannot be captured by any particular statement of faith.⁴⁸ Wulff refers to Fowler's fifth stage of faith and Ricœur's second naïveté in proposing the possibility of what he calls "restorative interpretation".⁴⁹ As Hutsebaut explains,

The restorative position is the person who wants to have a rational belief, it must be rational but it remains also belief. . . . Wulff says that until now, he did not know any operationalization of this type of belief and he doubts, because of the uniqueness of the person, on the possibility of operationalization.⁵⁰

By this last statement, Hutsebaut means that developing a standardized questionnaire for the restorative interpretation as a category may not be possible according to Wulff, given the "profoundly individual character" of second naïveté.⁵¹

What does Ricœur mean by second naïveté? To understand this, the key term to be understood is "symbol". Post-critical belief is symbolic. One cannot understand what is meant by literal belief, literal disbelief, relativism,

⁴⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper and Row, 1981), 187–88.

⁴⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 184–98.

⁴⁹ David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views* (John Wiley and Sons, 1991), 634–35; Dirk Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief: A New Approach to the Religious Attitude Problem," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 9, no. 2 (1996): 50. This article has been poorly proofread and contains many spelling and grammatical errors.

⁵⁰ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 50–51.

⁵¹ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 634–35.

and post-critical belief until one grasps what Wulff, Hutsebaut, and Pollefeyt mean by “symbolic”. In their religious world there are only two possible kinds of belief or disbelief: literal and symbolic. Any belief or disbelief which is not symbolic is, *ipso facto*, literal.⁵²

2.1. Symbol

What does Ricœur mean by a “symbol”? He explains it as follows: “I define ‘symbol’ as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.”⁵³ A symbol is a sign that communicates meaning, in fact, two meanings. However, not every sign is a symbol. Non-symbolic signs have only one meaning. They have no further meaning beyond their obvious one, while symbolic signs are “opaque”; the first literal meaning points analogically beyond itself to a deeper second meaning which is inexhaustible. The secondary meaning of a symbol can only be apprehended through the first meaning. Every symbol is enigmatic in the sense that it suggests rather than states its secondary meaning.⁵⁴

2.2. Demystification

What is the relationship between symbols and interpretation? Unlike allegories, which are already hermeneutic, “symbols precede hermeneutics”.⁵⁵ This is because it is the symbol that “gives rise to thought”.⁵⁶ Ricœur says this because his concept of symbol is indebted to Freud’s interpretation of dreams as having symbolic meaning.⁵⁷ Under the actual dream imagery experienced lies a hidden meaning, such as sexuality, life and death, family, and the body. As Ricœur says

⁵² For more on Pollefeyt’s understanding of “symbolic”, see McGregor, “The Leuven Project,” 110–11; Horner, “Enhancing Catholic School Identity,” 117–19; and McGregor, “Enhancing Catholic School Identity,” 28–31.

⁵³ Paul Ricœur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 13.

⁵⁴ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Beacon Press, 1967), 14–16.

⁵⁵ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 16.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 348.

⁵⁷ See Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (Yale University Press, 1970), 5–9.

to grasp how the theory of culture is related to the theory of dreams and the neuroses, it is necessary to go back to *The Interpretation of Dreams* of 1900, for it is here that the connection between mythology and literature is established. Ever since 1900 the *Traumdeutung* had proposed that dreams are the dreamer's private mythology and myths the waking dreams of peoples, that Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are to be interpreted in the same way as dreams.⁵⁸

We shall not go into the validity of Freud's theory here. Valid or not, Ricœur takes Freud's idea and universalizes it, applying it to the waking world as well. However, he sees this as a very difficult task. Hence, he says, "Interpretation. . . is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning."⁵⁹ There is no single hermeneutical method: "There is no general hermeneutics, no general canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation."⁶⁰ This results in a conflict of interpretations. On the one hand there is a hermeneutics that "demystifies" the symbol, that eliminates illusory meaning. On the other hand, there is a hermeneutics that seeks to recover and restore the real meaning of the symbol. These two opposites give hermeneutics as a whole a "double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience".⁶¹ Thus, the one interpreting is presented with two possibilities. One possibility is to proceed with an "exercise of suspicion,"⁶² usually called a hermeneutic of suspicion. The other possibility is usually called a hermeneutic of faith.

Ricœur claims that we must begin our hermeneutic of suspicion by being suspicious of consciousness itself, which he calls our "so-called immediate consciousness,"⁶³ that is, the consciousness of the thinking subject or *cogito*. However, because the *cogito* is "*mediated by the entire universe of signs*,"⁶⁴ one must first interpret the signs before one can understand oneself: "The short path of the intuition of the self by the self is closed. . . only the long path of

⁵⁸ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 5.

⁵⁹ Ricœur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 13.

⁶⁰ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 26–27.

⁶¹ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

⁶² Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32.

⁶³ Ricœur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 18.

⁶⁴ Paul Ricœur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 265. Italics in original.

interpretation of signs is open.”⁶⁵ This long detour is “suspicion”.⁶⁶ The hermeneutics of suspicion reveals that immediate consciousness is actually “false consciousness”.⁶⁷ The name that Ricœur gives to the hermeneutics of suspicion is “demystification”.⁶⁸

Ricœur acknowledges his debt to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, his three “masters of suspicion,” for his own hermeneutic of suspicion.⁶⁹ For religion, these three engage in an “external critique”.⁷⁰ Ricœur maintains that, if we take the ideas of these three together rather than separately, we will understand that “the theory of ideologies in Marx, the genealogies of ethics in Nietzsche, and the theory of ideas and illusions in Freud” illumine the problem of “false consciousness,” a term he borrows from Marxism.⁷¹ Bringing these three together enables us to engage “in a *general exegesis* of false-consciousness.”⁷² What the masters of suspicion reveal is our need to doubt. However, rather than Cartesian doubt which, while doubting “things” relied on consciousness, what needs to be doubted is consciousness itself. This doubt requires a “new technique,” a “new method of deciphering appearances”.⁷³ It requires a new “*hermeneutics*. . . a theory of interpretation”.⁷⁴ My comment on this is that the problem with the idea of false consciousness can be summed up in the saying, “What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander”. How do Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud know that their own ideas are not the products of their own false consciousness? Do they need to take the long detour and be suspicious of their own ideas?

For Ricœur, demystification not only reveals the falsity of immediate consciousness; it also deconstructs the false cogito. It undertakes “the ruin of the idols of the cogito”.⁷⁵ It is a form of “iconoclasm”; it destroys the idols of the cogito.⁷⁶ However, the immediate consciousness, the false cogito, “is at

⁶⁵ Ricœur, “The Question of the Subject,” 264–65.

⁶⁶ Ricœur, “The Question of the Subject,” 244.

⁶⁷ Ricœur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” 18.

⁶⁸ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

⁶⁹ Paul Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Regan and David Stewart (Beacon Press, 1978), 213–19.

⁷⁰ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 216–18.

⁷¹ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 214.

⁷² Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 214. Italics in original.

⁷³ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 215.

⁷⁴ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 214. Italics in original.

⁷⁵ Ricœur, “The Question of the Subject,” 242.

⁷⁶ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27. See also, Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 219.

the same time true symbol".⁷⁷ So, Ricœur teaches that "the idols must die so that the symbols may live."⁷⁸ After the hermeneutics of suspicion has killed the idols, it is time for the hermeneutics of faith to listen to what the symbols say.⁷⁹ Yet what does Ricœur mean by "faith"? It is the opposite of "suspicion". However, it is

no longer the faith of the simple soul [first naïveté], but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith. . . . It is a rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naïveté. Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, or recollection, of restoration of meaning. "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe"—such is its maxim; and its maxim is the 'hermeneutical circle' itself of believing and understanding.⁸⁰

At this point we need to realize that Ricœur is not writing about religious faith specifically, but about faith in general, faith as a natural human phenomenon. Yet like religious faith, this faith requires "obedience" to what the symbol says.⁸¹ Part of the task of the phenomenology of religion is the "restoration of the sacred".⁸² Only by postcritical faith can the sacred symbols become the way to the Sacred, to the Wholly Other.⁸³ Yet there is also a second source for Ricœur's hermeneutics of faith; Rudolf Bultmann's hermeneutics of demythologization, which reveals the real meaning under the literal meaning of the mythical symbols found in the Bible.⁸⁴ Through this method of biblical exegesis, one can uncover the divine "kerygma" found in Scripture.⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Paul Ricœur, "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 270.

⁷⁸ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 531.

⁷⁹ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 531.

⁸⁰ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28.

⁸¹ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

⁸² Paul Ricœur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 331.

⁸³ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 530–31.

⁸⁴ Paul Ricœur, "Preface to Bultmann," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 389.

⁸⁵ Ricœur, "Preface to Bultmann," 382.

2.3. Demythologization

Rather than engage in an external critique of religion à la Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, in his “Critique of Religion,” Ricœur focuses on an internal one. For him, the hermeneutical issue raised by Bultmann is “that of our *cultural estrangement*, of the cultural distance between, on the one hand, our world and our discourse of modern man and, on the other, the cultural expressions and the cultural world of the Gospel.”⁸⁶ Following Karl Barth, Ricœur states that the preaching of the kerygma

is not fundamentally rooted in our experience, has no correspondence in our experience; it cannot justify itself, prove itself by something about which we could say we truthfully await; it is the eruption of something from the other side, from the totally other into our culture”.⁸⁷

Ricœur likens this position to the folly of the preaching of the Cross. However, this totally other eruption into our culture then becomes part of our culture. The kerygma causes “a relationship of discontinuity and a relationship of continuity”.⁸⁸ The relationship of discontinuity means that

the Gospel will always be carried by an extraordinarily fragile testimony, that of the preacher, that of personal life, that of community. There is no proof which can support either the experience or the rationale. In this sense, the Cross *remains* a folly for the intelligent, a scandal for the wise.⁸⁹

Yet from this a new form of communication appears, one that draws on what Ricœur calls the “available believable”. He claims that we learned this from the form critics and Bultmann. For Ricœur, “Each epoch permits a believable and an unbelievable.”⁹⁰ According to him, what he calls “our generation,” that is, the generation of the 1960s, has discovered that,

the cultural vehicle has imposed its own law, that it is present in the expressions of the text. This presence first manifests itself under the form of a conception of the world that one could call mythological in the sense that it represents

⁸⁶ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 219. Italics in the original.

⁸⁷ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 219.

⁸⁸ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220.

⁸⁹ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220. Italics in the original.

⁹⁰ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220.

the world as a system of regions and localities which the destiny of beings is deployed; it is, therefore, by a sort of eschatological cosmology, with its hell and heaven, that the cultural vehicle first becomes evident. This mythological view in itself did not constitute a scandal for ancient man. It has become a scandal for modern man, *but this scandal is not that of the Cross*; it is the *false scandal* or a cultural vehicle which is no longer ours.⁹¹

For Ricœur, what he calls the “natural believable” in a particular culture will determine the nature of the “folly of the Cross” within that culture. So, in the culture of the time of Jesus, “the signs will become miracles, the divine origin of Christ is going to be expressed by way of the virgin birth; victory over death, the Resurrection, is going to be told in statements of the empty tomb, the miraculous apparitions.”⁹² However, in our epoch, the “cultural believable” and the “folly and scandal of the Cross and Resurrection” have now become dissociated.⁹³ The Cross is folly to everyone in every age, but now we need to overcome our cultural estrangement from the kerygma’s original mythological cultural vehicle. As Bultmann counsels us, we must demythologize. We must “dissociate the true scandal from the false scandal. To demythologize is to dissolve the false scandal in order to have the true scandal, the original scandal, revealed to all.”⁹⁴ Our task is now “to decipher scripture itself as a text which at the same time reveals and conceals”.⁹⁵ Ricœur draws an analogy between the first Christians’ relationship to the Old Testament, and our relationship to the New Testament: we must prevent the New Testament from becoming a mere “letter”. We must reinterpret it in a way that makes it believable in our own culture.

However, Ricœur also accepts Bultmann’s position, drawn from Heidegger, that he must carry out this task in a “hermeneutical circle”: “I can only, in effect, approach a text if I hear it as it speaks to me, if I am seized by what is said through the text. It is in this sense that it is necessary to believe in order to understand, but I cannot grasp what it has told me unless I first decipher the text.”⁹⁶ This is not only a psychological circle, but also a methodological one: “to know that it is the object of faith that rules the reading, but that it is

⁹¹ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220. Italics in the original.

⁹² Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220–21.

⁹³ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 221.

⁹⁴ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 221.

⁹⁵ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 222.

⁹⁶ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 222.

also the *method* of decipherment which rules the comprehension.”⁹⁷ Ricœur postulates that

this circle can only be broken by the believer in the hermeneutics when he is faithful to the community, and by the ‘hermeneut’ in the believer when he does his scientific work of exegesis. This is today the dual condition of modern man in whom struggles both a believer and an atheist; in the believer himself there confront one another an adult critic and a naïve child who listens to the Word.⁹⁸

3. Critiquing Demythologization

To engage in a full critique of the Ricœur’s concepts of symbol, demystification, and demythologization here would turn this essay into a monograph, so I will confine myself to focusing on demythologization. We have seen above that Pollefeyt is a demythologizer. According to him, “The Bible is written in a specific historical context and employs (sometimes obsolete) mythological, symbolic, and religious language in which the story of God with human beings is told.”⁹⁹ We shall see that Hutsebaut is also a demythologizer. Writing in 1941, Bultmann asserted that it was no longer plausible for Christians to accept the mythical world picture of the New Testament.¹⁰⁰ Although Bultmann rejected the possibility of discovering the “historical” Jesus, he nonetheless retained the position that the miracles recounted in the Gospels are mythological. From Bultmann’s and Freud’s understandings of myth we come to Ricœur’s understanding of myth. However, since then, two of the major developments in this area have seriously called into question the whole edifice built by form critics like Bultmann. These developments are the work of Richard Burridge on the Gospels as situated within the genre of Graeco-Roman biography, and that of Richard Bauckham on the Gospels as eyewitness testimony.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 222.

⁹⁸ Ricœur, “The Critique of Religion,” 222.

⁹⁹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 197.

¹⁰⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. Selected, edited, and translated by Schubert M. Ogden (Fortress, 1984).

¹⁰¹ See Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2017). A third major development has been that of what is Joseph Ratzinger calls method C, a combination of the best of historical-critical methodology with the patristic and medieval understanding of the spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture. This has come to be called theological or ecclesial exegesis.

3.1. The Gospels as Biography

Before Burridge's work, the received wisdom from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that the Gospels were a unique kind of literature, and certainly not biographical. In the twentieth century debates on this issue, the form critics were victorious in maintaining that the Gospels were *sui generis*. This was true even up to the 1970s. What Burridge argued in his 1992 *What are the Gospels?* was that, in many ways, the Gospels fit within the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. Comparing the four Gospels with ten such biographies,¹⁰² Burridge demonstrated that all four Gospels can be placed within the category of Graeco-Roman biography. He did this by constructing a typology of "generic features". These include opening features of a text, such as the title, opening words, and prologue; the subject of a text via an analysis of verb subject and allocation of space; external features of a text, such as representation, metre, size, length, structure, sequence, and scale; and internal features of a text, such as style, tone, mood, attitude, values, and quality of characterization.¹⁰³ He then applied this typology to the ten *bioi*, mentioned above.¹⁰⁴ Finally, he compared what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances" in the ten *bioi* with what we read in both the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John.¹⁰⁵ Amongst his conclusions are: Luke's and John's prologues align their work with conventions common to Graeco-Roman *bioi*; up to twenty-five percent of all verbs have Jesus as the subject, indicating his dominance as a central subject; and the space devoted to the passion and death of Jesus within the Gospels is not uncommon within *bioi*. Interestingly, Burridge asserts that the non-canonical gospels do not display the generic features of *bioi*.¹⁰⁶ From all of this, we can conclude that a first-century reader of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John would have regarded the four Gospels as biographies, as "lives" of Jesus, and would have interpreted their contents in that light. Of course, this conclusion does not demonstrate that the Gospels are fundamentally accurate accounts of the life of Jesus. However,

See Matthew Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and St. Thomas Aquinas* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 53–91; and Gregory Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

¹⁰² Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, chapters 6–7.

¹⁰³ Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, chapter 5.

¹⁰⁴ Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, chapters 6–7.

¹⁰⁵ Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, chapters 8–9.

¹⁰⁶ Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, 250.

what we can conclude is that their first auditors or readers would have *expected* them to be fundamentally accurate accounts of his life.

3.2. The Gospels as Testimony

The second is the work of Bauckham on the Gospels as eyewitness testimony. In his 2006 *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Bauckham argues that the longstanding assumption that the Gospels are based on anonymous community traditions is false. Rather, they are based on eyewitness testimony. To quote from the front inside cover summary,

Bauckham draws on internal literary evidence, the use of personal names in first-century Jewish Palestine, and recent developments in the understanding of oral tradition. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* also taps into the rich resources of modern study of memory, especially in cognitive psychology, refuting the conclusions of the form critics and calling New Testament scholarship to make a clean break with this long-dominant tradition. Finally, Bauckham challenges readers to end the classic division between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith”, proposing instead the “Jesus of testimony” as presented by the Gospels.

In his endorsement of Bauckham’s scholarship, Martin Hengel writes,

A fascinating book! I have not read such a stimulating monograph about Jesus research in a long time. With its high scholarly standards and astute arguments, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* shows new insights and ways of investigation. It will therefore become a pioneering work, refuting old and new errors. This book ought to be read by all theologians and historians working in the field of early Christianity.¹⁰⁷

Bauckham looks at the Gospels as a particular kind of history, namely testimony. For him, the principal criterion for the selection of the four Gospels as authentic was apostolicity. They are written by apostles or people close to the apostles, that is, persons close to the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ history. Therefore, the Gospels embody the testimony of those close to Jesus. The eyewitnesses would have been regarded as reliable witnesses to the events and the meaning of the events. Moreover, as examples of Graeco-Roman biography,

¹⁰⁷ On the inside back cover of *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

though open to using written sources, the Gospels would have drawn especially on the testimony of eyewitnesses. According to Bauckham, ancient historiographical practice resembled modern oral history. The Gospel writers would have treated eyewitnesses as the best available sources. The first audience of the Gospels would have expected them to be based substantially on eyewitness testimony.

Given the work of Burridge and Bauckham, we can say that Hutsebaut's and Pollefeyt's acceptance of demythologization as the last word in biblical scholarship argues for an ignorance of what has happened in the field over the last thirty-five years. When it comes to biblical hermeneutics, the furthest they have got is the 1980s.

4. From Ricoeur to Wulff

Raised as a Lutheran, Wulff followed a path trodden by some "Bible-believing" young Protestants. Brought up on daily Bible readings and memorizing "such biblical facts as what God created on the third day (dry land and vegetation) and how many years Methuselah had lived (969),"¹⁰⁸ his faith was tested at age 14 when an older brother died of cancer.¹⁰⁹ Upon enrolling in a Lutheran liberal arts college, Wulff found his faith further challenged, so much so that "but by my senior year it seemed as if a vague belief in God might be all that would survive of my childhood faith."¹¹⁰ Wulff goes on to recount how a

new perspective on religion was slowly taking shape in me, first reflected in my fascination with the Gnostic tradition. . . . Learning about Gnosticism – including its sharply dualistic worldview, esoteric doctrine of salvation, and profusion of mysterious symbols – prepared me for an immediate appreciation of Jung's analytical psychology, which was shaped in part by Jung's early study of Gnostic symbolism. It also helped me to see how profoundly the Christian tradition had been transformed by its battle with the Gnostic 'heresies' and how deeply conditioned religious traditions are by human imagination and culture.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ David Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," in *Psychology of Religion: Autobiographical Accounts*, ed. J. van Belzen (Springer, 2023), 252.

¹⁰⁹ Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," 253.

¹¹⁰ Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," 254.

¹¹¹ Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," 254.

The last gasp of Wulff's faith occurred during his post-graduate studies. In an address at his hometown church, he

cautiously suggested the possibility that 'some stories' in the Bible are mythic, that is, truer than historical fact in the way they address the human condition. And I extolled the virtues of love, tolerance, and forgiveness. But I also asserted that 'a belief in the creativity of God, the redemptive nature of Jesus, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit gives a strength and assurance not otherwise possible.' I presume I was sincere. But the reality is that, a year later, I left the Lutheran Church effectively an atheist.¹¹²

Wulff describes his subsequent state of mind as follows: "It was a relief no longer to profess beliefs that had never been supported by my own experience."¹¹³

Its reliance on Wulff was one of the main criticisms levelled at the PCBS by the *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*. The *Review* states that,

The relevance of this background to the issue of the Post-critical Belief Scale is that the typology devised by Wulff, abstracted by Hutsebaut, and adopted by Pollefeyt and Bouwens, has its origins in a non-theological perspective that sought to decentre the Protestant-Christian outlook but without taking any account of Roman Catholic theological understandings of Christian identity. . . . Critically, however, 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. The uncritical adoption of the Hutsebaut, Wulff-inspired psychology of religion and the advocacy of 'recontextualising' theology is therefore problematic.¹¹⁴

In an epilogue to his *Psychology of Religion*, Wulff presents a model of religious attitudes in the form of a Cartesian plane.

¹¹² Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," 257.

¹¹³ Wulff, "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion," 258.

¹¹⁴ Giacco et al., *Review of Religious Education Curriculum*, 22.

Summary Schema of Views in the Psychology of Religion

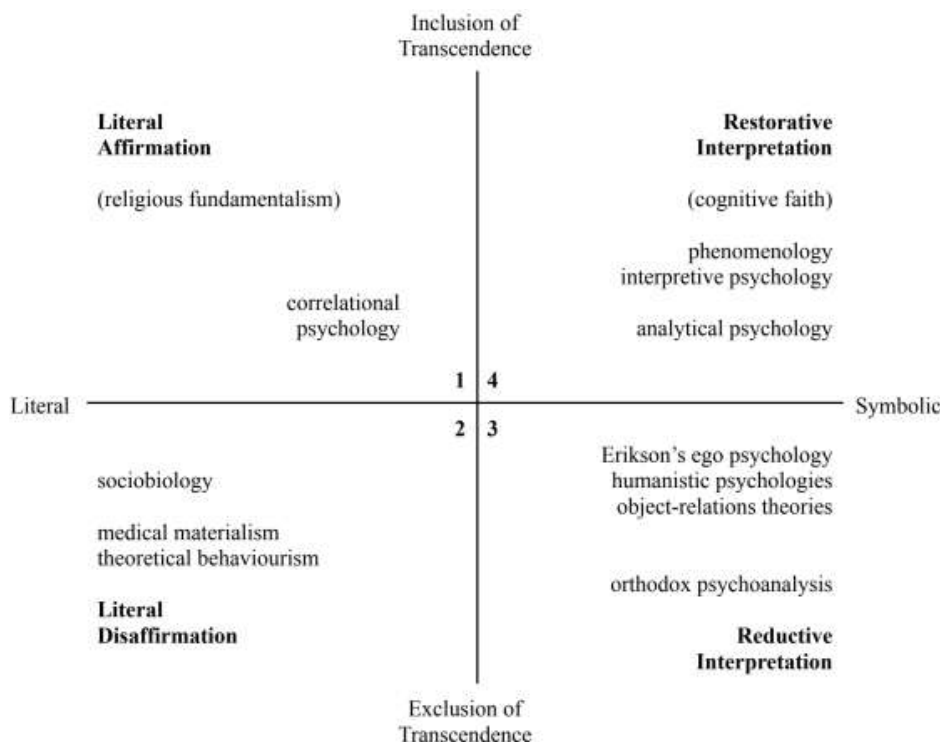


Figure 2. Wulff's model of psychology of Religion and religious attitudes.¹¹⁵

We can see that Wulff's model has four quadrants bisected by two axes: one being inclusion/exclusion of transcendence and the other literal/symbolic. In this schema, literal affirmation equals religious fundamentalism, while literal disaffirmation equals the rejection of fundamentalism characteristic of behavioural and social scientists. The latter are also often literalists, since they do not realize that religious language can be metaphorical or figurative.¹¹⁶ The third and fourth quadrants are called reductive interpretation and restorative interpretation respectively. It is these two quadrants that are explicitly derived from Ricoeur. As Wulff explains, Ricoeur

proposes that modern hermeneutics faces two opposing though potentially complementary tasks: on the one hand *reduction* or demystification, in order to

¹¹⁵ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 631.

¹¹⁶ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 632.

clear away from religious symbols the excrescence of idolatry and illusion; and on the other hand, *restoration* or recollection of meaning, so that the object of suspicion may once again become an object of understanding and faith.¹¹⁷

However, Wulff's schema departs from Ricœur's in four important ways. First, he has a different starting point: the literal affirmation of fundamentalism. In contrast, Ricœur's starting point is the first, literal meaning of symbols. Second, he has a different perspective, that of atheism. This is the starting point of his own "lived experience". Ricœur's perspective is that of an "autonomous" Christian, his own lived experience. As a Protestant, although he might have said that he believed in the Bible, or that the Bible was his ultimate authority, in fact, he believed in his own interpretation of the Bible. However, since a book is not an author, the Bible cannot exercise authority. This means that Ricœur was his own final authority, the ultimate arbiter of religious truth. Through supposedly discovering the deeper meaning of the symbol, he could restore his religious belief. Third, Ricœur's schema does not have any axes, either inclusion/exclusion of transcendence or literal/symbolic. In other words, there are no Ricœurian quadrants. Rather, the best way to visualize Ricœur's schema is not an axial one, but an *exitus-reditus* one: from literal belief in the symbol there is an *exitus* through demystification, followed by a *reditus* through demythologization to the true hidden meaning of the symbol: Primary Naïveté > Demystification/Reductive Interpretation (*exitus*) > Demythologization/Restorative Interpretation (*reditus*) > Second Naïveté. Fourth, because Wulff is following his own lived experience from fundamentalism to atheism, and approaching the issue as a psychologist of religion, he divides Ricœur's reductive interpretation in two. He justifies this by saying, "In isolation and in its most resolute form, reductive interpretation stands with literal disaffirmation in denying reality to the transcendent referent of religious language and practice."¹¹⁸ Because Wulff has superimposed a literal/symbolic axis on Ricœur's schema, he creates a division that does not exist in Ricœur's understanding of reductive interpretation. For Ricœur, there is no "more resolute form" of this interpretation.

Wulff is an instantiation of a possibility that Ricœur did not anticipate, someone who loses faith in God yet retains an interest in and appreciation of religion, in other words, an atheistic psychologist of religion. This explains the inclusion of various forms of psychological perspectives in Wulff's schema, as seen above: correlational psychology in the literal affirmation quadrant;

¹¹⁷ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 633.

¹¹⁸ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 633.

sociobiology, medical materialism, and theoretical behaviourism in the literal disaffirmation quadrant; orthodox psychoanalysis, object-relations theories, humanistic psychologies, and Erikson's ego psychology in the reductive interpretation quadrant; and analytical psychology, interpretive psychology, and phenomenology in the restorative interpretation quadrant. In fact, the schema has been produced "to classify both individuals and psychological approaches", with the chief interest being in the latter.¹¹⁹ The masters of suspicion do not fall into the reductive interpretation category. They are instantiations of a more resolute form of rejection of the first symbolic or literal form of belief, which Wulff calls "external critique", whereas people like Wulff accept the external critique which excludes transcendence but also accept the symbolic meaning of religion. This category is valid because, although they are few and far between, people like Wulff do exist. Wulff is a person who has demythologized the symbol but has not made the choice to embrace a second naïveté belief. Regarding the restorative interpretation, as seen above, Wulff wonders if it is possible to measure second naïveté via standardized questionnaires, given its "profoundly individual character". Wulff gives William James as an example of this difficulty: "His disdain for religious symbols invites placement in Quadrant 2; his theory of the subconscious self and his emphasis on faith's consequences, in Quadrant 3; and his sensitivity to others' transcendent experiences, in Quadrant 4".¹²⁰

5. From Wulff to Hutsebaut's First Model

Hutsebaut's first model for the Post-Critical Belief Scale is presented in a 1996 article, "Post-Critical Belief: A New Approach to the Religious Attitude Problem". In it, he outlines his approach to religious attitudes as follows,

In the Leuven (Hutsebaut, 1980) tradition. . . [we] have seen the religious attitude as a structure of relations to God and we constructed in the mid seventies a scale differentiating 7 relational types to God, some more positive ones: co-humanity, identification, dependence, ethical norm; some more ambivalent ones, frustration and guilt; and a negative one autonomy.¹²¹

However, he holds that this approach, as well as others, has a problem.

¹¹⁹ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 630.

¹²⁰ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 636.

¹²¹ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 49.

Most of these approaches are of an a-posteriori strategy, that means that the studies started with a very open approach and that the structuring of the data came out of the analysis of the data. In other words we have the impression that most of these studies didn't start from a more or less theoretical framework and that the theory came after the observations and the analysis of the data.¹²²

Why does Hutsebaut see this as a problem, given that it follows the normal scientific method? He goes on to say that he has the impression that the questions asked in "these kinds of approaches do not interest the subjects, and have become more difficult for them to answer, seemingly "coming from another world and not from their world, including from their belief world. For many people in our country, these kinds of items have become too catholic (sic), too christian (sic) for them."¹²³ Furthermore,

these kinds of scales are not differentiating (sic) enough between types of believers. Items have the tendency to collapse together in terms of approving or disapproving, without differentiating between types of religious approval. This was the case in our studies with the Leuven tradition scale and also with the intrinsic-extrinsic-quest scale, where we used the Dutch version of Derks (Derks, 1990).¹²⁴

In response to this, Hutsebaut says

we thought that it could be useful to try to formulate a new approach of this religious attitude problem and we thought that it would be necessary to start from a delineated theoretical framework. We found this framework in the work of Ricœur, but by the intermediary role of Wulff (Wulff, 1991) and Fowler (Fowler, 1981).¹²⁵

Having said this, Hutsebaut proceeds to explain how he understands Wulff's model of religious attitudes and how Wulff uses Ricœur's concept of second naïveté. I find this explanation to be accurate.¹²⁶ Hutsebaut begins with the observation that Wulff's model is heuristic and might be called a "trial and error" approach, or one based on generalizations. Furthermore, Hutsebaut

¹²² Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 49.

¹²³ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 49.

¹²⁴ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 50.

¹²⁵ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 50.

¹²⁶ Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," 50–53.

recognizes that the purpose of the model is to classify different approaches to the psychology of religion.¹²⁷ However, he also says that these approaches “can be seen also as different types of religious attitude”.¹²⁸ Hutsebaut presents Wulff’s model in diagrammatic form, noting that it has two central axes, “one with the opposition between inclusion or exclusion of the transcendent and one with a symbolic opposed to a literal interpretation of religious language”.¹²⁹ It has

four different types of approach and of religious attitude; literal affirmation, literal disaffirmation, reductive interpretation and restorative interpretation. The literal interpretation is the position of the fundamentalist or in a lower version the very orthodox believer. The literal disaffirmation is the position of the real unbeliever, not accepting in Wulff’s view the literal interpretation and is in that sense also a rather literal thinker, not considering a possible symbolic interpretation of the religious text. The reductive position is the person, the central example is in Wulff’s view Freud, who tries to reduce the religious interpretation to non-religious variables. He reduces the religious belief to an illusion. The restorative position is the person who wants to have a rational belief, it must be rational but it remains also belief. Wulff refers to the concept of the conjunctive faith, the fifth stage of Fowler and refers to the concept of second naïveté of Ricoeur. It is seen by Wulff as the most mature way of believing and perhaps best adapted to modern society and modern way of thinking. Wulff says that until now, he did not know any operationalization of this type of belief and he doubts, because of the uniqueness for the person, on the possibility of operationalization.¹³⁰

This last statement has already been mentioned. By it, Hutsebaut means that developing a standardized questionnaire for the restorative interpretation as a category is not possible for Wulff, given the “profoundly individual character” of second naïveté. A key point to consider in the above quote is that Hutsebaut either does not realize or just ignores the fact, mentioned above, that Wulff has split Ricoeur’s reductive interpretation in two, into literal disaffirmation and a reduced reductive interpretation. The masters of suspicion would be placed in the first, while Wulff would be placed in the second. However, Hutsebaut places Freud in Wulff’s third quadrant, the reduced reductive one. Yet while

¹²⁷ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 50.

¹²⁸ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 50–51.

¹²⁹ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 50.

¹³⁰ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 50–51.

Freud recognizes symbols, he is not open to the value of religious symbols, as Wulff is. Rather, as Hutsebaut says, Freud “tries to reduce the religious interpretation to non-religious variables. He reduces the religious belief to an illusion”. Freud does not fit in the quadrant that excludes transcendence but includes the symbolic. While both Freud and Wulff think religion is illusory, Freud thinks of it negatively, while Wulff thinks of it positively. Hutsebaut’s error does not lie in misunderstanding Ricœur, but in not fully grasping how Wulff approaches belief from a different perspective than Ricœur does, and how he alters Ricœur’s schema.

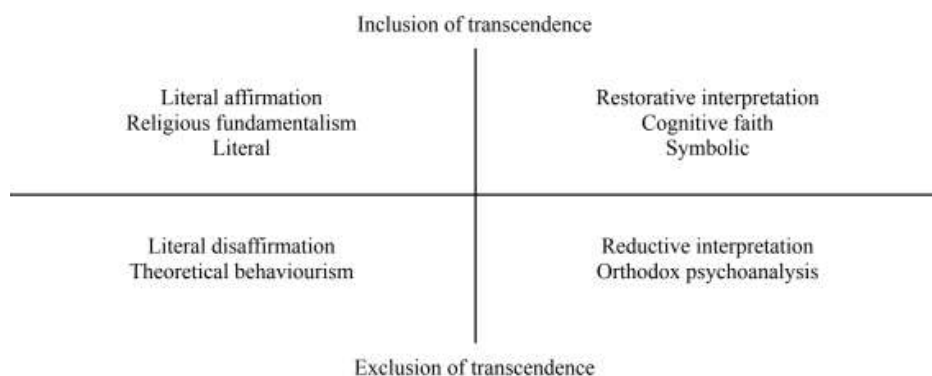


Figure 3. Wulff’s model of psychology of religion and religious attitudes. (p. 631)¹³¹

How did Hutsebaut set about implementing Wulff’s model? As he explains,

In a seminar with students we tried to formulate items, inspired by the ideas of Ricœur and the other authors saying something about this concept of second naivete. It is not possible to present to subjects directly statements of Ricœur, but we tried to formulate statements, indicating elements of his thinking.¹³²

In other words, Hutsebaut got together some students to try to work out what kind of statements would enable them to place surveyed participants in one of Wulff’s four quadrants of religious attitudes. The initial survey group consisted of 381 adults, most of whom were well educated Catholics who believed in God and were practicing their faith. Most had received a Catholic education and

¹³¹ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 51.

¹³² Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 53.

considered themselves to be Catholics.¹³³ This survey revealed five dimensions, which Hutsebaut calls orthodoxy, external critique, Quest belief, Bible, and Historical relativism.¹³⁴ “Orthodoxy” is defined as “belief as a right and unique answer on religious questions”. An example of it is that statement, “I find that you have to read the texts in the Bible as they are presented literally.” “External critique” is defined as “belief is influenced by critiques from others”. An example is, “The scientific (sic) explanations for humans and world have made unusefull (sic) the religious explanations.” “Quest belief” is defined as, “belief knowing that everything is not sure and certain, but a continuing process of search”. For example, “In spite of the fact that in religious belief not everything is clear, I will follow the way of belief”. “Bible” is defined as giving “more content to the quest belief, related to the Bible and the interpretation of texts”. I will record both the examples given: “The Bible has a profound hidden meaning and I can find this meaning by a personal search,” and “I am more critical than before, but this makes the stories of the Bible more meaningful”. “Historical relativism” is defined as, “belief that is aware of the historical dimension of belief statements.” For example, “I am profoundly convinced of the fact that every sentence about God is determined by the historical period in which it is said”.¹³⁵ In addition to these five basic dimensions, Hutsebaut also applies twelve other “measured dimensions”. These are intrinsic/extrinsic, fear of uncertainty, positive God relation, feelings of frustration against God, fear and culpability against God, autonomy, literal/symbolic, degrees of certitude, the degree of religious/profane certitude, general well-being, the dimension of self-realization, and ethnocentricity.¹³⁶

Using Wulff’s scheme of ordering psychological attitudes towards religion, and the above-mentioned dimensions, Hutsebaut identifies three “dimensions”, the orthodox subject, external critique subject, and historical relativist subject. An absolute atheistic dimension, Wulff’s literal disaffirmation attitude is not identified because of the “rather believing population of our study”.¹³⁷ The orthodox subject Hutsebaut equates with Wulff’s literal affirmation and Ricœur’s first naïveté; his external critique subject with Ricœur’s and Wulff’s reductive interpretation/external critique; and his historical relativistic subject with Wulff’s restorative interpretation and Ricœur’s believer who has come through demythologization to a second naïveté. Hence, Hutsebaut, following Wulff,

¹³³ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 54.

¹³⁴ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 54. Capitalization in original.

¹³⁵ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 54.

¹³⁶ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 55–56.

¹³⁷ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 56.

defines both orthodoxy and external critique as literal, while only historical relativism is symbolic.

Hutsebaut sums up the three subjects in general terms as follows. The orthodox subject has a high level of certainty about beliefs. This subject generally has positive relations with God but can also experience anxiety and guilt feelings. This subject knows that one can ask questions about belief. This subject interprets the Bible “literally” but is also open to symbolic interpretations. At the same time, this subject “is anxious and uncertain about new and complex problems”.¹³⁸ With this subject, the “level of self-realisation (POI) is negatively correlated with his belief structure and he has some feelings of ethnocentricity and anomia”.¹³⁹ There can be orthodox believers of a “pure fundamentalistic form”, but there “remains an openness for symbolic interpretations of the religious message”.¹⁴⁰ However, generally speaking, the “thinking is of a literal type”.¹⁴¹

The external critique subject is not a real unbeliever. Religion is still present, albeit in a negative or ambivalent mode. This subject’s religiosity

is coloured by the critique formulated by the masters of suspicion. This means that the subject is in search of objective certainty, he is anxious about uncertainty in belief, he wants to be objectively sure about belief just as he can be sure in objective positive science. His religious belief is also coloured by feelings of frustration, God has not given what he asks, and he is stressed by the tension in his life accorded to the paradox of human autonomy in opposition to a surrender to God. . . It is interesting to note that he shows a positive correlation with anomia, which means that he has a general feeling of uncertainty.¹⁴²

Surprisingly, Hutsebaut has the least to say about the historical relativistic subject. This subject is

basically aware, after reflection that his way of thinking about religious belief is one possibility besides other possibilities. He has a fundamental symbolic interpretation of the Bible stories and is fundamentally aware of the quest dimension in belief. He has a positive God relation, but weaker than the orthodox subject.

¹³⁸ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 56–57.

¹³⁹ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 57.

¹⁴⁰ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 57.

¹⁴¹ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 57. By “anomia”, Hutsebaut seems to be referring to Émile Durkheim’s concept of “anomie”, a sense of alienation from social norms.

¹⁴² Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 58.

He has no fear for the complexity of the questions. And he is not coloured by ethnocentricity and anomia. His basic mode of thinking is symbolically.¹⁴³

Hutsebaut finishes with “some preliminary ideas about a possible developmental model”.¹⁴⁴ He begins with the idea that the subject in childhood “has been confronted with the religious system, and that his first and childish reaction will be literal”.¹⁴⁵ However, this does not mean that the child is orthodox. Rather, “it is his way of reaction in function and determined by his cognitive abilities”.¹⁴⁶ However,

At a certain moment in his life, and we presume that the period of adolescence is very important here. . . he had to make some ‘choices’. Different possibilities are open: we see a first possibility in rejection the literal thinking, it can not be true that Jesus has walked on the water, it is a rather simple kind of unbelief, equal to Wulff’s possibility of literal disaffirmation. A second possibility is that the subject remains in this literal thinking and becomes what we called an orthodox subject. We assume that some personal characteristics are important in this process. A third possibility is that the subject confronts himself and is confronted with the external critique, so present in the thinking of society about religion. For a period or for ever he becomes an external critique subject, interacting with religion and religious data from this rather positivist viewpoint and with the fundamental tension with accentuating human autonomy. It seems now possible that a subject can work out this period and turns into (sic) historical relativism, but we don’t know under which conditions and circumstances. We ask the question if a person can turn directly from childish literal thinking to symbolical thinking and to historical relativism. We think that this possibility, without passing the period of critique seems a very difficult one.¹⁴⁷

It is important to realize that Hutsebaut has taken a heuristic model designed to classify behavioural and social scientists, and psychologists of religion, and then sought to apply it to a group that was mainly composed of well-educated, practicing Catholics. Furthermore, he has not arrived at his understanding of post-critical belief via the collection of data and the formation of a hypothesis, which is then tested with further experimentation, that is, *a posteriori*. Rather,

¹⁴³ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 57–58

¹⁴⁴ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 63.

¹⁴⁵ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 63.

¹⁴⁶ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 63.

¹⁴⁷ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 63.

he has begun with Wulff's heuristic model and asked questions on this basis, that is, *a priori*. The danger of "confirmation bias" is obvious. The survey statements have been crafted to fit the model rather than the model being established through posing survey statements. Another point to take note of is that Hutsebaut is a "demythologizer". Moving from an adolescent, literal belief may include the conclusion that Jesus cannot have walked on water.

6. Hutsebaut's Second Model

The first model of the PCBS was developed by Hutsebaut in 1996 and 1997.¹⁴⁸ It is accurately presented in diagrammatic form below.

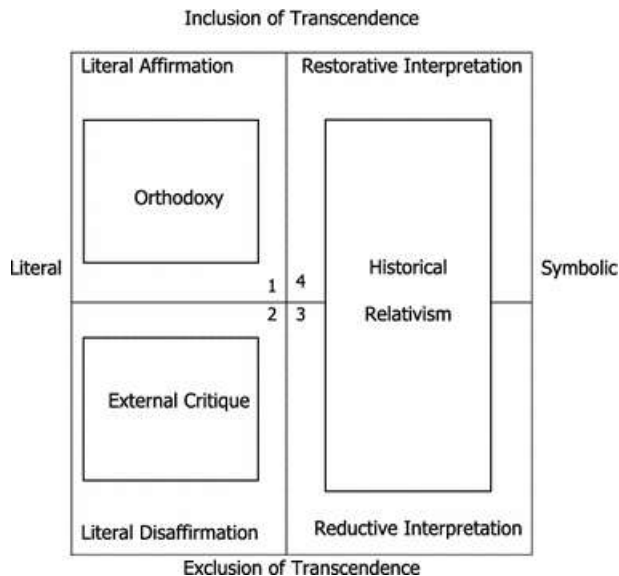


Figure 4. Integration of the three Post-Critical Belief subscales in Wulff's (1991, 1997, 1999) theoretical model according to Hutsebaut (1996) (see Fontaine et al. 2003).¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Besides Hutsebaut, "Post-Critical Belief," see Dirk Hutsebaut, "Identity Statuses, ego-integration, God representation and religious cognitive styles," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 10, no. 1 (1997): 39–54; Dirk Hutsebaut, "Structure of religious attitude in function of socialization pattern," 6th European Symposium for Psychologists of Religion, Barcelona, August 24–28, 1997; Pascal Desimpelaere et al., "Psycho-Epistemological Styles and Religious Beliefs," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1999): 125–37, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpro902_3.

¹⁴⁹ Śliwak and Zarzycka, "The Interplay Between Post-Critical Beliefs and Anxiety," 421.

What is important to note is that Hutsebaut's category, historical relativism, covers Wulff's two categories, reductive interpretation and restorative interpretation. However, by 2000, Hutsebaut and his associates had changed this model. A new model was regarded as necessary because,

The findings of Desimpelaere et al. . . raised doubt about the interpretation of External Critique. Both Orthodoxy and External Critique were found to be positively related to Perry's (1970) psycho-epistemological style of Dualism. This style is characterized by a preference for unambiguity: There is only one right answer for each problem. These findings suggested that both Orthodoxy and External Critique are rooted in a literal mode of thinking and that the External Critique items, in terms of Wulff's model, were measuring Literal Disaffirmation instead of Reductive Interpretation.¹⁵⁰

In response to this statement, I would say that, somehow, the authors of this article have forgotten that Wulff's model was designed for behavioural and social scientists, and psychologists of religion, whereas Hutsebaut's first model was designed for Catholics. Hutsebaut is comparing apples and oranges. Wulff's literal disaffirmation quadrant is essentially atheistic, while Hutsebaut's original external critique is not. Hutsebaut left out atheistic unbelief as a religious attitude. Wulff has four dimensions while Hutsebaut only has three. What this means is that Hutsebaut's original external critique does not fit in any of Wulff's quadrants. It is neither Wulff's literal disaffirmation nor Wulff's reduced reductive interpretation, which covers people like Wulff, that is, atheists who nevertheless have an appreciation for the value of symbols. For Wulff, reductive interpreters are not religious. Hutsebaut has been trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The authors go on to identify two problems with the PCBS.

First, the internal structure of the Post-Critical Belief scale does not fit Wulff's model very well. According to Wulff (1991;1997), the domain of religion is characterized by two bipolar dimensions (Inclusion vs. Exclusion of Transcendence and Literal vs. Symbolical) that give rise to four approaches to religion. Instead of two bipolar dimensions, three unipolar factors are identified in the Post-Critical Belief scale. This raises doubts about the use of Wulff's model of interpretation of the three dimensions or the Post-Critical Belief scale. Second,

¹⁵⁰ Bart Duriez et al., "A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale: Evidence for the Existence of Four Different Approaches to Religion in Flanders-Belgium," *Psychologica Belgica* 40 (2000): 156, <https://doi.org/10.5334/pb.961>.

although items of the External Critique dimension were constructed to measure Reductive Interpretation, external correlations suggest that this dimension actually measures Literal Disaffirmation.¹⁵¹

The question regarding this second point is: Who's reductive interpretation, Wulff's or Ricœur's? The answer is, neither. Hutsebaut's original external critique corresponds neither to Ricœur's external critique/demystification, which critiques religion from "outside", nor Wulff's reductive interpretation, which is atheistic. Hutsebaut's original external critique is made by "religious" people.

There are three fundamental problems here. First, Wulff has extracted aspects of Ricœur's schema, rather than adopt the whole schema, while Hutsebaut has done the same with Wulff's schema. Thus, Wulff's schema is a distortion of Ricœur's, and Hutsebaut's schema is a distortion of Wulff's. Second, Ricœur, Wulff, and Hutsebaut all have different "lived experiences", an autonomous Christian who has reached what he regards as a second naïveté, a Bible-believing Christian turned atheist who has been unable to reach what he regards as a second naïveté, and a demythologizing Catholic who has reached what he regards as a second naïveté. Third, they each apply their schemas to different groups of people. Ricœur applies his to 1960s Europeans, Wulff to 1980s social, behavioural, and psychological scientists, and Hutsebaut to 1990s Belgian Catholics.

At this point, rather than abandon Wulff's schema, go back to square one, and start all over again, Hutsebaut and his colleagues press on. By introducing the factor of ambiguity versus dis-ambiguity, and conducting three new studies,¹⁵² they arrive at the following conclusion. I present the conclusion to the first study verbatim.

Two bipolar dimensions were identified that could be interpreted in terms of Wulff's model: Inclusion versus Exclusion of Transcendence and Literal versus Symbolic (Wulff, 1991; 1997). This representation sheds new light on the Post-Critical Belief subscales. Contrary to the original interpretation (Hutsebaut, 1996; 1997), External Critique is situated at the literal side of the second dimension. Furthermore, Historical Relativism appears to be comprised of two subscales, Second Naïveté and Relativism, which correspond to Wulff's Restorative and Reductive Interpretation respectively.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Duriez et al., "A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," 156.

¹⁵² Duriez et al., "A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," 158–61.

¹⁵³ Duriez et al., "A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," 162.

The second and third studies offered nothing substantial to this initial conclusion.¹⁵⁴ In the end, the authors come to a general conclusion that “it was consistently found that Historical Relativism needed to be split up into two different dimensions: Relativism, which forms an operationalization of the Reductive Interpretation, and Second Naïveté, which forms an operationalization of Restorative Interpretation.”¹⁵⁵ In fact, Hutsebaut and his colleagues equate relativism with Wulff’s reduced reductive interpretation. Thus, the second model of the PCBS has four dimensions; literal affirmation, external critique (Wulff’s more resolute reductive interpretation), relativism (Wulff’s less resolute reductive interpretation), and second naïveté (Wulff’s restorative interpretation).

What is the difference between historical relativism and relativism? According to Hutsebaut’s initial study, historical relativists score high on openness to complex questions and have positive “god images.”¹⁵⁶ They also score high on “quest belief,” that is they believe despite knowing that “everything is not sure and certain”. Their belief in God gives them a “profound sense” to their lives.¹⁵⁷ They think that the Bible has a profound, hidden meaning, which they can personally find. Although they are more critical, this very critical attitude makes the Bible more meaningful. Finally, they are aware that belief statements are historically determined. A historical relativist would say: “I am profoundly convinced of the fact that every sentence about God is determined by the historical period in which it is said.”¹⁵⁸ How does Hutsebaut’s relativism differ? In his new quadrant four and quadrant three,

The items of quadrant 4 clearly capture an inclusion of transcendence, while the items in quadrant 3 capture a more relativistic stance. Therefore, conceptually, the items of quadrant 4 can be measured in terms of Restorative Interpretation and can be seen as measuring what Ricoeur (1970) called Second Naïveté.¹⁵⁹

By “more relativistic”, Hutsebaut means the exclusion of transcendence. Hence, “Reductive Interpretation represents a position in which the existence of the religious realm is rejected, and in which a privileged perspective on the hidden

¹⁵⁴ See Duriez et al., “A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale,” 163–69.

¹⁵⁵ Duriez et al., “A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale,” 169–70.

¹⁵⁶ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 57.

¹⁵⁷ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 54.

¹⁵⁸ Hutsebaut, “Post-Critical Belief,” 54.

¹⁵⁹ Duriez et al., 159–60. The 1970 reference is to Ricoeur’s *Freud and Philosophy*.

meaning of a religion's myths and rituals is claimed",¹⁶⁰ while "Restorative Interpretation represents a position in which the existence of a religious realm is affirmed, and in which one tries to encompass and transcend reductive interpretations in order to find the symbolic meaning of the religious language".¹⁶¹ Both quadrant three and four are still "historical", in the sense that beliefs are determined by historical context. In other words, this definition classifies Wulff as a relativist.

7. A Problem with the Quadrant of Relativism

Hutsebaut's quadrant of relativism contains people who reject the transcendent, who believe that religion is a human construction, and yet for whom, "A positive interest in religions remains, sometimes even sympathy or fascination for religious matters."¹⁶² Yet he also says,

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).¹⁶³

Those in quadrant four accept transcendence, but those in quadrant three have a more "relativistic stance" which rejects transcendence. Hutsebaut and his colleagues noted that "most Historical Relativism items seem to be situated in the upper right quadrant. However, some of the Historical Relativism items were situated in the lower right quadrant."¹⁶⁴

Pollefeyt seems to be aware that there is a problem with this quadrant. Thus, he admits,

Sometimes relativism can be a (temporary?) position of *non-commitment*: one refrains from a positive choice for a more definite view. Options are kept open, choices are postponed, one refuses to engage oneself. (This is a possible

¹⁶⁰ Johnny R.J. Fontaine et al., "The Internal Structure of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," *Personality and Individual Differences* 35 (2003): 503, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(02\)00213-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00213-1).

¹⁶¹ Fontaine et al., "The Internal Structure of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," 503.

¹⁶² Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 9.

¹⁶³ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 8. Italics in original.

¹⁶⁴ Fontaine et al., "The Internal Structure of the Post-Critical Belief Scale," 505.

explanation why the internal consistency of the relativism-items in the PCB Scale is often relatively low.)¹⁶⁵

Let me suggest another reason for this lack of internal consistency and low score. The fundamental problem with this quadrant is that hardly anyone fits its criteria. Few people who regard religion as a merely human construction also regard it in a positive light. The few who consistently fit this pattern tend to be psychologists of religion like Wulff who, although a Christian turned atheist, is still very interested in religion as a psychological phenomenon. Carl Jung might also fit in this quadrant, although Wulff placed Jung's analytical psychology just "over the border" in restorative interpretation.¹⁶⁶

Why does Pollefeyt retain this quadrant despite its problems? First, to excise it would undermine the whole rationale of the PCBS. Furthermore, he is concerned with the charge of really being a relativist, that post-critical belief is really a form of relativism. Pollefeyt consistently denies it as a misinterpretation by literal believers.¹⁶⁷ So, what was originally included in historical relativism becomes post-critical belief.

8. A Problem with the Quadrant of Post-Critical Belief

Despite Wulff's warning that "the 'second naïveté' . . . has not yet been adequately operationalized with standard questionnaires, and perhaps cannot be, given its profoundly individual character",¹⁶⁸ Hutsebaut attempts to do it. Yet there is a broader problem with the post-critical belief quadrant. There are many people whose existence the PCBS does not acknowledge, who, nevertheless, are open to transcendence. There are numerous people who will say, "I am not religious, but I am spiritual". In fact, they even have their own acronym, SBNR, spiritual but not religious. In 2018, the Australian National Church Life organisation carried out an Australian Community Survey. Using "cluster analysis" of responses to both the religious and spiritual self-perception questions, it identified four general approaches to religion and spirituality. People in the first group saw themselves as religious and spiritual people who practiced a religion. Those in the second group saw themselves as religious and spiritual people who were

¹⁶⁵ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," (9). Italics in original.

¹⁶⁶ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 634.

¹⁶⁷ For example, see Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "The Post-Critical Belief Scale for dummies," 13; and Pollefeyt and Bouwens, "Framing the identity of Catholic schools," 197.

¹⁶⁸ Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, 634–35.

affiliated with a particular religion but did not practice it. These two groups were about equal in size and made up about half the Australian adult population (52%). The survey goes on to say,

The third (smallest [13%]) group emphasises spirituality (especially spiritual experience) but not adherence to, nor practice of a religion. We will use the short label, “SBNR”, which is used widely by other researchers to indicate those who are spiritual but not religious. The fourth (and largest [35%]) group is unaffiliated, atheist/agnostic and neither religious nor spiritual.¹⁶⁹

Where would the PCBS put 13% of the Australian adult population? They are not literal believers or literal disbelievers. They are open to transcendence, so they do not fit in the relativism quadrant. Only the post-critical belief quadrant is left.

One group of people who SBNRs are called New Agers. While I was writing this essay, the Mind, Body, Spirit Festival was in progress in my hometown.¹⁷⁰ Amongst more than 160 exhibitors, one could find psychic mediums, tarot card readers, numerologists, aura photographers, spiritual counsellors, yoga masters, clairvoyants, reiki masters, chakra healers, crystal healers, shamans, palmists, astrologers, and people who offer to put you in touch with your angel guide. There were no white witches this year. Amongst all these exhibitors and the thousands of people who attend this festival, I doubt that one would hear any arguments between neighbouring stall holders or attendees about who has the truth. No one will say to someone who visits his or her stall, “I teach the truth and all the other exhibitors here are wrong.” Have all these people arrived at a restorative interpretation of religious symbols? Have all reached a second naïveté? Of course, one does not find many such people in Catholic schools. Yet they do not fit in quadrants one, two, or three.

According to the ECSI project, Catholic symbols communicate meaning. This meaning is found in “religious metaphors and truths of faith”.¹⁷¹ One’s understanding of God is mediated through “traditional Catholic objects and practices such as crucifixes, Bibles and Scripture quotations, statues and artwork, the school chapel, prayer tables, celebrations, posters, icons, candles”.¹⁷² Likewise,

¹⁶⁹ NCLS Research, “Religious, spiritual, neither or both? 4 groups of Australians,” <https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/religious-spiritual-neither-or-both/>.

¹⁷⁰ Mind, Body, Spirit Festival, Sydney, 19–22 March 2026, <https://mbsfestival.com.au/sydney/>.

¹⁷¹ Pollefeyt and Bouwens, “Framing the identity of Catholic schools,” 195.

¹⁷² Paul Sharkey, “Monica Doumit is wrong: Leuven faith project *is* Catholic, says Paul Sharkey,” *Catholic Weekly*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/monica-doumit-is-wrong-leuven-faithproject-is-catholic/>.

New Agers find meaning in their spiritual practices. These are mediated through séances with spirits of the dead, tarot cards and readers, numbers, auras, yoga practices, chakra stones, crystals, shamanistic practices, palm readings, astrology charts, contact with “angels”, and witchcraft. In a way, it is not surprising that New Agers do not come up on the PCBS “radar”. They were not around for Ricœur to find in the 1960s, they are not usually behavioural or social scientists, or psychologists of religion, and I do not think that they were prominent in Belgian schools in the 1990s. What is revealed about the PCBS is that it is both anachronistic and lacking in scientific rigour. The groups surveyed were not sufficiently representative of the diversity of belief or disbelief within contemporary secularized societies. There is an acronym for this in computer science and information technology, GIGO, garbage in, garbage out. In other words, the incomplete data analysed by the PCBS produces results that are seriously inaccurate.

9. The Fundamental Flaws of the Post-Critical Belief Scale

The above two sections have outlined problems in the quadrants of relativism and post-critical belief. However, underlying these flaws are some more fundamental issues. It has been possible to address some of these in this essay. First there is at least one epistemological problem. If one’s consciousness of oneself, one’s knowledge of oneself, is inherently false, how can it be possible to escape from this false consciousness? How does one know that one’s interpretation of signs is not simply another exercise in false consciousness? Second, demythologization is an anachronistic position. The biblical scholarship that underlies it is out of date. Third is the dependence of the PCBS on Wulff’s model of religious attitudes. As pointed out by the review of religious education in the archdiocese of Melbourne, Wulff’s non-theological perspective that “sought to decentre the Protestant-Christian outlook” is problematic. A Catholic perspective “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”. Fourth, we see the conceptual distortions that accompany the practice of only partially adopting someone else’s schema, Wulff of Ricœur’s and Hutsebaut of Wulff’s. Fifth, we have the problem of taking a concept from someone else, then applying it from a different personal experience or perspective. We saw how Wulff starts with a premise that is not Ricœur’s, and Hutsebaut begins with a premise that is not

Wulff's. Sixth is the problem I call the universalization of personal experience, which Ricœur, Wulff, and Hutsebaut all have. Each one thinks that everyone is somewhere on the same path he has travelled. This seems to be a common problem amongst phenomenologists. However, it is not only SBNRs that do not fit into any of their categories or quadrants. I am not a demystifier or a demythologizer. I am not a literal believer or disbeliever. I am not a relativist or post-critical believer. Undoubtedly, if Pollefeyt administered the PCBS to me, I would be plotted somewhere on its Cartesian plane, but the location would be wrong. My "blip" on the PCBS radar would be a phantom one.

The reason that the PCBS would not detect me brings us to a deeper, even more fundamental problem with the scale. It is a theological problem. Ricœur, Wulff, Hutsebaut, and Pollefeyt all treat belief as though it is only a natural phenomenon. Granted, all belief has a natural element, and some forms of belief are only natural. For instance, some accept the religious beliefs they are taught because they trust the people who already believe the doctrines, and tell them that the doctrines are true, people like parents, priests, and religious education teachers. This is the kind of faith that children often have, and sometimes this faith extends into adult life. We could call it a kind of natural faith, a faith in human beings. This kind of faith is not bad. The Samaritans who lived near Jacob's Well initially believed in Jesus because of the testimony of the woman who met him at the well (see John 4:42). However, in a detraditionalized, secularized society, it is unlikely that such a faith will survive a child's leaving the bosom of their Catholic family or school, even if it survives that long. It is people who have this natural faith who, in adolescence or twenties, do sometimes move to what the PCBS calls literal disbelief.

Such a natural faith needs to become a supernatural faith. For a Christian, belief is also a supernatural phenomenon. Faith is a grace, a gift from God. This theological virtue of faith is based on knowledge. This is true even of the natural faith that one human being has in another. The more we come to know the trustworthiness of the other, the more we can put our faith in them. The same holds true of God. Through the Holy Spirit, he reveals himself in our hearts as our *Abba* (see Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Furthermore, the issue is not just one of faith, but of all three theological virtues. If we do not have certain faith, how can we have certain hope and certain love? The Greek term *elpis*, which we translate as "hope", means an expectation of something that *will* happen. This is why the Letter to the Hebrews says, "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain" (Heb 6:19). The theological virtue of hope is certain about what God has revealed about our ultimate destiny. In the final analysis, how can I trust

a God whom I do not know, and how can I love a God whom I do not trust? St. Paul gives us the answer to this question:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:1–5).

St. Paul also says, “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). The essence of faith is saying Yes to God, while the essence of sin is saying No. This is something that the PCBS survey neglects to ascertain; do those being surveyed have a natural or supernatural faith, a faith that says Yes to God? This is a dichotomy that does not appear on the PCBS radar.

References

- Bartczuk, Rafał P., Beata Zarzycka, and Michał P. Wiechetek. “The Internal Structure of the Polish Adaptation of the Post-Critical Belief Scale.” *Roczniki Psychologiczne* 16, no. 3 (2013): 563–85.
- Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd edition. Eerdmans, 2017.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. Selected, edited, and translated by Schubert M. Ogden. Fortress, 1984.
- Burridge, Richard A. *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Desimpelaere, Pascal, Filip Sulas, Bart Duriez, and Dirk Hutsebaut. “Psycho-Epistemological Styles and Religious Beliefs.” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1999): 125–37. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpro902_3.
- Duriez, Bart, Johnny R.J. Fontaine, and Dirk Hutsebaut. “A Further Elaboration of the Post-Critical Belief Scale: Evidence for the Existence of Four Different Approaches to Religion in Flanders-Belgium.” *Psychologica Belgica* 40 (2000): 153–81. <https://doi.org/10.5334/pb.961>.
- Fontaine, Johnny R.J., Bart Duriez, Patrick Luyten, and Dirk Hutsebaut. “The Internal Structure of the Post-Critical Belief Scale,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 35 (2003): 501–18. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869\(02\)00213-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-8869(02)00213-1).
- Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. Harper and Row, 1981.

- Giacco, Natina, John Haldane, and Gerard O'Shea. *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne* (November 2023), <https://www.macs.vic.edu.au/MelbourneArchdioceseCatholicSchools/media/Documentation/Documents/RE-Curriculum-Review-Report.pdf>.
- Horner, Robyn. "Enhancing Catholic School Identity: A Response to Peter McGregor." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2023): 112–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231160385>.
- Hutsebaut, Dirk. "Identity Statuses, ego-integration, God representation and religious cognitive styles." *Journal of Empirical Theology* 10, no. 1 (1997): 39–54.
- Hutsebaut, Dirk. "Post-Critical Belief: A New Approach to the Religious Attitude Problem." *Journal of Empirical Theology* 9, no. 2 (1996): 48–66.
- Hutsebaut, Dirk. "Structure of religious attitude in function of socialization pattern." 6th European Symposium for Psychologists of Religion, Barcelona, August 24–28, 1997.
- Hutsebaut, Dirk. "The Post-Critical Belief Scale." A copy of the survey can be found by searching online for "KU Leuven Post-Critical Belief Scale".
- McGregor, Peter John. "Enhancing Catholic School Identity: Shedding More Light." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2024): 20–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400231213405>.
- McGregor, Peter John. "The Leuven Project: Enhancing Catholic School Identity?" *Irish Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2022): 106–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00211400221078904>.
- Mind, Body, Spirit Festival, Sydney, 19–22 March 2026, <https://mbsfestival.com.au/sydney/>.
- NCLS Research, "Religious, spiritual, neither or both? 4 groups of Australians." Accessed March 23, 2026. <https://www.ncls.org.au/articles/religious-spiritual-neither-or-both/>.
- O'Shea, Gerard. "Vulgarised Rahnerianism and Post-Critical Recontextualisation: Solvents of Catholic Identity in Contemporary Catechesis." *Studia Elckie* 16, no. 3 (2014): 341–73.
- Pollefeyt, Didier. "ECSI @ KU LEUVEN: A response to *Review of the Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne*," 28 November 2023. <https://ecsi.site/au/response-to-review-religious-education-curriculum-catholic-schools-melbourne/>.
- Pollefeyt, Didier, and Jan Bouwens. "Framing the identity of Catholic schools: empirical methodology for quantitative research on the Catholic identity of an education institute." *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2 (2010): 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2010.504034>.
- Pollefeyt, Didier, and Jan Bouwens. "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." Centre of Academic Teacher Training, Faculty of Theology, K.U. Leuven, 2009. <https://theo.kuleuven.be/apps/press/ecsi/files/2019/03/4.-Pollefeyt-Bouwens-PCB-Melb-Vict-for-dummies-EN.pdf>.
- Ramage, Matthew. *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and St. Thomas Aquinas*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.
- Ricœur, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde. Northwestern University Press, 1974.
- Ricœur, Paul. "The Critique of Religion." In *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur: An Anthology of His Work*, edited by Charles E. Regan and David Stewart. Beacon Press, 1978.
- Ricœur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. Yale University Press, 1970.
- Ricœur, Paul. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. Beacon Press, 1967.

- Sharkey, Paul. "Monica Doumit is wrong: Leuven faith project *is* Catholic, says Paul Sharkey." *Catholic Weekly*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/monica-doumit-is-wrong-leuven-faithproject-is-catholic/>.
- Śliwak, Jacek, and Beata Zarzycka. "The Interplay Between Post-Critical Beliefs and Anxiety: An Exploratory Study in a Polish Sample." *Journal of Religion and Health* 51 (2012): 419–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-010-9367-2>.
- Szydłowski, Piotr, Radosław Rogoza, and Jan Ciecuch. "The structure of the attitudes toward religion as measured by the Post-Critical Belief Scale: A structural modelling approach." *Current Psychology* 42, no. 5 (2021): 10792–803. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-02367-2>.
- Vall, Gregory. *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2022.
- Wulff, David. "The Evolution of a Psychologist of Religion." In *Psychology of Religion: Autobiographical Accounts*, edited by J. van Belzen. Springer, 2023.
- Wulff, David. *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views*. John Wiley and Sons, 1991.
- Zarzycka, Beata, Rafał P. Bartczuk, and Radosław Rybarski. "Centrality of Religiosity Scale in Polish Research: A Curvilinear Mechanism that Explains the Categories of Centrality of Religiosity." *Religions* 11, no. 2: 64 (2020): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020064>.
- Zarzycka, Beata, and Elżbieta Rydz. "Explaining the Relationship Between Post-Critical Beliefs and Sense of Coherence in Polish Young, Middle, and Late Adults." *Journal of Religion and Health* 53 (2014): 834–48.

PETER JOHN MCGREGOR (DR.) – lecturer in dogmatic theology at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and the University of Notre Dame Australia. He is the author of *Heart to Heart: The Spiritual Christology of Joseph Ratzinger*, and a co-editor of *Healing Fractures in Contemporary Theology* and the *Theology at the Beginning of the Third Millennium* series. His research interests lie in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, fundamental theology, theological anthropology, missiology, and postmodern theology.

