

## Talking about Jesus: and why it matters

### Abstract

This article will focus on better understanding how a highly selective group of youth in Catholic schools express their beliefs about Jesus. Previous work in this area has recorded the preference that students have for depictions of Jesus that highlight his humanity (Claerhour and Declercq, 1970; Astley and Francis, 1996; Walshe, 2005). The sample that I will report on will be a highly differentiated one, in order to make the reported data more powerful. The group selected to participate in this study are reasoned to be the most likely to be able to articulate clear and consistent beliefs about Jesus, that is young people who have some connection with parish communities and who readily describe themselves as Catholics.

Many adolescents and young adults in contemporary culture lack a coherent understanding of religious beliefs. Davie (1999, 83), writing from a European perspective, puts the problem in these terms: *an ignorance of even the basic understandings of Christian teachings is the norm in modern Europe, especially among young people.* The lack of content knowledge is not confined to those who have no connection with religious groups. In the United States, Smith and Denton (2005, 266) have remarked that one of the features of adolescents is that they were often unable to articulate their views on religious beliefs even when they describe themselves as religious. In the largest study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers ever undertaken, one of their conclusions was as follows, *we were astounded by the realization that for very many teens we interviewed it seemed as if our interview was the first time any adult had ever asked them what they believed.* This appeared to be a particular issue for Catholic teenagers, despite attending Catholic schools or being involved in after hours education programs. These findings are supported by research from Australia. Flynn (1993, 430), in an extensive longitudinal study of senior students in Australian Catholic secondary schools, reaches a similar conclusion when investigating the religious knowledge of students. In a telling comment, Flynn stopped asking students questions about what he calls knowledge of the Catholic faith because they found them so hard to answer: *... it quickly became apparent that Year 12 students were not familiar at all with the theological concepts and language used. One student in a large high school, for example, asked the writer "who is this person Grace?"* Flynn goes on to remark that only one student out of the 5,932 surveyed correctly answered all the 24 religious knowledge questions.

In an article of this size it is impossible to address the more complex epistemological questions that surround the relationship between expression and acceptance of belief. Nonetheless, if we accept the basic argument of Davie and others, a number of questions arise, perhaps the most fundamental is whether or not this ignorance is an important matter. I would argue that it is for at least two reasons. The construction of identity is dependant on many factors. One of the most important is the ability of the individual to describe to themselves and to others the core beliefs that animate them. This point is a feature of the monumental work of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (Taylor 1985, 1989). It is Taylor's contention that one of the characteristic features of modernity is the pressure it places on the qualitative distinctions that undermine the moral life. One of the first signs that this pressure is being exerted is when individuals find it increasingly difficult to articulate reasons for the beliefs that they hold. I think a similar type of argument can be extrapolated to cover the need for religious believers to be able to express in precise and cogent terms key aspects of their beliefs.

A second argument can be developed from a sociological perspective. Stark and Finke (2000) propose that one way of gauging the strength of a religious tradition is the degree of convergence between what they call the objective demands of a religious tradition and how closely individuals are able to articulate this and then to live it out. Put another way Stark and Fink's argument places great emphasis on what the religious tradition sees as important. In a vital religious community believers are able to explain these important areas well as a prelude to incorporating them into a distinctive worldview. Less vibrant religious communities on the other hand are typified by a disparity between what the tradition holds and what members of the community are able to express.

One way of advancing this discussion is to take an empirical approach and examine the articulation of religious beliefs by adolescents in a contemporary Australian context. In order to narrow what is a potentially large field we can restrict this question to a subsection namely those adolescents who are most likely to be able to respond to questions about religious beliefs. A methodological issue in dealing with the religious beliefs of adolescents is sensitivity to the scope of questions that are asked. To ask a teenager what their beliefs are lacks a focus that may assist the participants to answer. One way around this difficulty is to ask more precise questions. Instead of a question about belief, a question on a particular belief, or a small set of beliefs is generally more appropriate. In the case of Catholicism there are a number of distinctive beliefs that are of pivotal importance. Perhaps none are more important than beliefs about Jesus. A legitimate question in light of the previous discussion is how Catholic students in senior secondary school would after many years in Catholic schools, and where the academic expectations on them are relatively high, answer questions around the general probe of beliefs about Jesus.

### The Study

Thirty-two participants, from eight Catholic secondary schools from across Victoria were initially selected using predetermined criteria. Core Catholic youth were defined, following Fulton et al (2000), by the following three criteria:

- Regular Church attendance
- Regular Church attendance and involvement in the parish by parent(s)
- Being involved in something *extra*, as a result of faith commitment, such as being part of a prayer group either at school or in another setting.

In order to be invited to participate in the study youth needed to fill two of the three criteria listed above. Students were selected on the recommendation of key school personnel such as the Religious Education Coordinator who had a sound knowledge of which students matched the selection criteria. In addition a fourth criterion was added to the Fulton descriptors.

- A willingness by the participant to describe themselves as a Catholic.

As it was reasoned at the senior secondary level most student would have made some type of decision about their allegiance to the faith tradition and we were interested in only those students who as well as meeting two of the three of Fulton's descriptors also described themselves as Catholic.

Each participant was interviewed for no more than one hour. The interviews followed a semi-structured in-depth pattern (Minichiello et al 1995). Participants were asked about their beliefs in four areas; Jesus, the Eucharist, Mary and the interface between science and religion. In this paper it is only possible to report responses about Jesus. All interviews were taped and then transcribed. After each interview, participant responses were analysed in detail, using contemporaneous notes as well as the taped record and thematic response codes developed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These codes were related to common response categories and dominant categories identified. These categories then informed the next interview and response categories became more and more refined (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

Twenty-nine of the participants were in Year 12, the remaining three were in Year 11. Seventeen of the participants were female. Twenty eight of the participants were placed by the selecting teachers as being in the top third of students in the year level in terms of academic achievement. Thirty of the participants attend Catholic primary schools as well as secondary schools for all of their education.

### Results

Three dominant response categories, ambiguous, naturalistic and orthodox were established all of which are subsumed by a widespread inability of participants to articulate their beliefs about Jesus. In the reported data that follows I have devoted some space to a series of questions and responses. This is not the usual single quotation to illustrate a point but I think it gives a better picture of the way in which participants responded to questions. It was, as a general principle, very difficult to get participants to talk about their Christological beliefs.

#### **Ambiguous responses -Jesus – that's a hard one!**

When many participants asked about their beliefs about Jesus found these difficult to express. The inarticulate nature of these responses makes them hard to analyse but nonetheless they are important to report as they represent a clear response category.

Interviewer. What are your beliefs about Jesus?

Participant. That's a hard one. It's an ongoing sort of unravelling thing. I don't have any real set beliefs on Jesus. I just make up my mind as I go along if that sounds a bit strange. The belief in Jesus is probably the unclear of my beliefs in the Catholic faith. HU 2

Interviewer. What are your beliefs about Jesus?

Pretty awesome! I don't know about the whole miracles that he performed and that sort of stuff, I think of him healing the blind man it might be just another fable story. I don't know if he was actually blind or if he couldn't see it's hard to explain. But I believe in Jesus, I don't know about believing in god but I believe in Jesus. KO 9

The second quote above illustrates well some of the contradictions that are inherent in the participants response to questions about belief in Jesus. Belief in Jesus is acknowledged even if his miraculous healings are ascribed to fable. The respondent is much firmer in his belief in Jesus as opposed to belief in God. Further probing of responses in this category was not productive as participants lacked a basic theological vocabulary which made any ongoing discussion very diffuse and difficult to interpret.

#### **Naturalistic responses: the human Jesus- the great role model**

The strongest response category by far was participants who described Jesus in human terms, as a great teacher or role model. Participants who responded in this way expressed their views without using an explicitly theological language often favouring a moral or ethical description.

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I think that he was generally a good person and somebody that we can model our behaviour on, loving others, as you know, expect others to treat as you would expect them to treat you, that sort of thing. KS(7)

When participants were asked further about the qualities that Jesus possessed, the strongest response category were naturalistic descriptors that often equated Jesus to a social activist or a great moral leader. To get participants to talk about the type of person that Jesus was often involved persistent questioning, as it was a theme that most participants did not respond to spontaneously or at great length.

Interviewer (I): Tell me something about your belief on Jesus?

Participant: (P) A really good guy.

I: Anything else?

P: Nope.

I: But there are lots of good guys.

P: He's an extremely good guy.

I: there are a few extremely good guys.

P: Alright, alright. One that I would like to marry, no not really, I'm only joking.

I: Anything distinguishing about him?

P: The fact that he came and I find it pretty amazing that he went to all the lepers and he healed them on the Sabbath when he wasn't supposed to and did all that outrageous stuff, but it was all good stuff to help people. And he's a very good role model.

I: Let me take a different tack here. Is Jesus different to a great role model like Martin Luther King?

P: He didn't really speak out to everybody, his major messages were in his work.

I: So were Martin Luther King's

P: I don't know. I don't know. I just like Jesus better

I: You haven't used any metaphysical language to describe Jesus. You've used all great guy, role model and that kind of stuff. What about the stuff that is in creed, god from god, light from light,

P: God is the light of the world not Jesus. PO 4

#### **Orthodox responses**

A third response category was classified as orthodox. These responses contained reference to traditional descriptions of Jesus, credal statements such as born of the Virgin Mary or the Son of God. When adolescents use this type of language there is always a question of what they understand of this terminology. Participants who gave orthodox responses were probed further about how they came to this understanding and whether they could link their description to other theological concepts.

I. Tell me about your beliefs about Jesus

P. I believe the creed. I believe that Christ became man of the Virgin Mary, I believe that his teachings were profound, its just that his examples were, I believe that he taught, that he fed 5000 people, that he performed those miracles.

I. Can you explain that a bit further?

P. Apart from the fact that we have been spoon fed this all our life, which is the truth, I mean, I've been a Catholic since, well since I was baptised of course, but I think I feel OK, so many people have believed in Christ so I sort of follow that, but also, every time I go to mass, every time, when I talk to Jesus, I, myself, I feel him and so, I don't necessarily have Jesus in my mind telling me, talking to me, but I feel like I can feel his presence, and in saying that, that's how I can believe. That's how I believe, you know, you don't have any other Tom, Dick or Harry, you don't feel their presence, you don't have their presence. I feel Christ's presence. KP 7

Participants who tried to give a more detailed and sophisticated explanation of their belief in Jesus found this difficult as their theological language was not well developed. This often became evident after more detailed questioning.

I. Tell me more about your beliefs about Jesus

P. Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus from what I've been taught, he's the saviour of us. He was put here to save us. I don't really think about this a lot, so!

I: This Son of God idea, what does that mean, can you say a bit more about that?

P: what does it mean? Oh, I'll have to go back over all the steps in RE! God, I don't know, that's just what I've been taught to know so I don't really go that far into it I guess. I can't help you with anything else!

I: I mean, how can a man be the Son of God? How can he be god and man at the same time?

P: That's hard, because no-body is perfect or has special powers, but I don't know how he could be. But from what I've been taught, it's just basically that he was created by god without any other help basically.

I: What about his humanity, what kind of person was Jesus?

P: He was kind and he looked after the people that no-one else cared about. He just went about, in a way he was being himself, just going and helping people and would sit with people that no-one else liked and stuff like that.

I: What about when he was on the cross, who was suffering, was it the human Jesus or the god Jesus?

P: The human Jesus

I: Where was the god Jesus?

P: I don't know where exactly he was, but I think he was partly there, so it wasn't just the human Jesus dying on the cross, it was god suffering that pain for people as well. Cause I mean Jesus showed pain like any other person would feel, but yet he was able to get past it sort of, like I don't know. He was resurrected, that's his divine side I guess. Human died and divine came back sort of. MM 2

### Discussion

This article sought to gain a better understanding how a highly selective group of youth, young people who have some connection with parish communities and who readily describe themselves as Catholics, express their beliefs about Jesus. The inarticulate nature of most of the responses, was, perhaps, one of the most significant findings. This cannot be easily explained as a function of recent enrolment in Catholic schools, a lack of familiarity with Catholic culture or a relatively low level of academic ability. The participants, with two exceptions, in this study were all completing their thirteenth year in Catholic schools, they were with four exceptions seen by teachers as being in the top third of student in their year level in terms

of academic performance. They were all active members of parish communities and readily described themselves as Catholic.

The centrality of Jesus to Catholicism does not need to be emphasized yet the data from this study suggest quite strongly that active Catholic youth do not have a strong conceptual grasp of who Jesus is in terms of the self understanding of the religious tradition. This work strongly supports the conclusion drawn by Smith and Denton (2005) about the inability of US teens, but especially Catholics teenagers, to articulate their religious beliefs. The results of this study also support the finding of Walshe (2005) and others that when students express their beliefs about Jesus, the strongest response category identifies Jesus as a human figure.

I would like to now discuss two questions which following from the basic contention of the paper. Firstly, why do Catholic teenagers who are active in parish communities, have been at Catholic schools for many years and are academically talented have an inability to speak about their beliefs in an educationally sophisticated way? In this study I have reported the response to probes about Jesus but the data from the three other probe areas followed a similar pattern. My response to this is of a tentative nature and will take the form of two hypotheses. This is not intended as a comprehensive answer but addresses only one aspect of the problem, that is, what occurs in religious education classrooms in Catholic schools. My hypotheses are based on my sense of what occurs in religious education classrooms and my observations of the natural inclinations of the many RE teachers I have encountered in my work as an educator at Australian Catholic University.

#### *Hypothesis one*

One reason that students in Catholic secondary schools lack sophisticated content knowledge of conceptually difficult areas in religious education is that some key concepts are not developed beyond a certain cognitive level.

#### *Hypothesis two*

Most classroom teaching about Jesus concentrates on his humanity.

Kantor and Lowe (2004) have noted that a key to successful teaching is the content knowledge of teachers. Shulman (1987) has also commented that pedagogical content knowledge- the ability to teach well - is dependant on a number of factors one of which is familiarity of the teacher with the content areas that they are covering. Baumfield (2005) has made a similar point with specific reference to teachers of religious education. I have

argued previously that teaching hard topics in RE requires both sophisticated pedagogy and theological knowledge (Rymarz, 2004). Most RE teachers do not possess this. Engebretson and Rymarz (2002, 2004) have found that most RE teachers working in Catholic secondary schools lack strong academic qualifications to teach religious education. So they are unlikely to teach these complex topics such as Christology well. If RE teachers teach them at all, there is a tendency to tackle those aspects of topic that are more amenable to student and teacher comprehension. I think teaching about Jesus is a good illustration of this process. The Chalcedonic notion of distinctive human and divine natures of Christ united in one person is complex idea. Teaching about the human Jesus, the person like us, is by comparison much more straightforward.

I think the notion of first approaching teaching about Jesus from a human perspective is very sound pedagogy and flows from the theological principle of ascending Christology articulated by Rahner and others (Egan, 1998). I suspect a problem develops when this basic approach is repeated year after year so that the cognitive understanding of students remains stationary. One way of testing this idea would be to investigate how Christology is taught across a curriculum and to look for signs of repetition. Another focus would be to see what teaching and learning strategies are used. What is being examined here is whether there is sufficient development of the theme over a number of years. Similar studies have been conducted in scripture (Stead, 1996, Grace 2003). These found there was a strong tendency for teachers to repeat scripture stories year after year at both primary and secondary level and to be unable to move beyond a simple historical analysis of scripture. If similar patterns occur in theologically difficult areas then it is unlikely that students' understanding of these topics will be well developed.

A second question is whether or not it is important for student to have a well developed understanding of key Catholic beliefs. Let me advance two arguments that support the idea that this knowledge is important. Firstly the dominant educational paradigm used in religious education used in Australia and elsewhere for at least the past two decades has been the educational approach (Buchanan, 2005). An important aspect of this approach is that religious education should be able to use the language and tools of the general educational discourse and apply these to religious education. An important part of this discourse is the spiral curriculum; this is the idea that as students progress through the school they are presented with more and more complex

presentation of key concepts. A corollary of this is that difficult ideas are also tackled in an educationally sophisticated way as possible. If religious education is to sit within this general educational approach it must be able to demonstrate a commitment to developing students' understanding in a sequential manner and also not to shy away from areas which require a high level of teaching expertise.

Secondly, a more epistemological tuned argument arises from the need to provide students in religious education with an understanding that is coherent. For a position to be coherent two conditions are put forward as of pivotal importance, namely consistency and explanation (Everitt and Fisher, 1995). Coherent beliefs are consistent, and also within the total set of beliefs there is some explanation for every individual belief. It seems that knowledge about Jesus fits well under both these criteria. Firstly, it consistently follows from other ideas such as the uniqueness of Christ as the embodiment of the new covenant. If Jesus was not both human and divine then much of what Catholics believe about Mary, about the passion and the resurrection are impossible to reconcile. Secondly, it is explanatory of many features of belief and practice. A good understanding of what Catholics believe about Jesus will explain many factors of Catholic life and provide an entry into other area of the faith tradition. If the teacher is reluctant to teach about Jesus on philosophical grounds then it seems that a basic grasp of coherent epistemological theory should allay these fears.

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