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Michael A. Conway

‘This Little Heart of Mine’: Education in the Catholic Tradition

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What is it that characterizes a Catholic school? What is essential in such a school? What is it that marks it out? These are important foundational questions in understanding the activity, the structures, and the expectations that go with faith schools. There is much that might be said in response to these questions. I’d like to explore what I believe to be not only the heart of a Catholic school, but that which characterizes its essential contribution to contemporary culture. And let me add immediately that this is not over against other schools, but, hopefully, in conversation and in cooperation with them. I hope that what I have to say will underline the precise privilege that it is to work in a Catholic school, and the great potential that our schools harbour in terms of the rich contribution that they might make to society. I am only sketching a response from within my own competence as someone, who reflects on faith in contemporary culture; and in no way do I wish to tell you how you ought to work in the classroom; that is your own professional skill and experience; but my hope is that you might find it helpful to transform something of what I will suggest into lived experience and practice. And it is in that spirit that I stand before you; not as someone with answers, but as someone who wishes to open, possibly, new horizons.¹

THE SIGNIFIER ‘CATHOLIC’

I’d like to speak first about the word ‘catholic,’ which I think is one of the finest words in the vocabulary of religious faith and identity. However, I am sometimes reticent about using it because it is so easily misunderstood, and it is so often used abusively in many circles. The signifier ‘catholic’ is sometimes used, and especially in educational circles, in a manner that does not honour even the

¹ This is an abridged version of a lecture given to the Annual R.E. Seminar (Inter-Diocesan), *Carlow College, St. Patrick’s*, Carlow, 3 March 2022.

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literal integrity of the word.² Etymologically, the word comes from the Greek, *κατά* (kata) and *ὅλον* (holon), meaning literally, ‘according to the whole.’ Now if the word is used reductively to designate a limited cohort of people, or a separated group in society, or a prescriptive set of ideas, or a particular range of beliefs, it is in a fundamental contradiction with what it signifies. The word itself is being abused; or there is a slight of hand at play that masks other forces that are behind the use of the word. It means, as I say, according to the whole, kata-holon, and, therefore, *according to the mystery*. Any principle of limitation in the use of the word is always, already a deep betrayal of *that* mystery.

It is particularly disturbing when the word is used as a principle of exclusion; and it is scandalous, even, when this is done in the name of Christian faith.³ It can never be used with integrity in that way. In a particularly egregious form, the word is used to designate a system of beliefs or truths, whose acceptance supposedly secures a faith identity in contra-distinction to others. This would mean that a Catholic school, for example, is a place of explicit (or, more usually, implicit) exclusion, sometimes imaginary, sometimes literally, making it a supposed ‘privileged’ place in the landscape of the human condition. It suggests a closed locus of identity, that secures one’s position in a tradition of faith. On so many levels this is problematic. It is a false understanding of tradition, rooted in a misguided reading of revelation, and lived out in a theologically deficient ecclesiology. It generates fear of the other and of otherness, arrogance in the self, and alienates young, emerging persons from the full lived reality and richness of Catholic faith. Speaking recently to the De La Salle Brothers, gathered for their General Chapter, Pope Francis said: ‘You educate to responsibility, creativity, coexistence, justice, and peace. You educate to the interior life, to be open to the transcendent dimension, to the sense of wonder and contemplation in the face of the mystery of life and creation. You live all this and interpret it in Christ and translate it into the fullness of humanity.’⁴

2 The signifier ‘catholic’ can be used in multiple ways in different contexts. For the sake of this discussion, I am dealing with the substantial form or expression. For a treatment of the juridical usage, for example, see Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ Nos. 54-58; https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html (accessed 25 May 2022).

3 The Congregation for Catholic Education warns against a too ‘narrow’ understanding of the model of a Catholic school that contradicts the vision of an ‘open’ Catholic school (see Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 72). See also, *ibid.*, Nos. 68-71.

4 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-de-la-salle-brothers-world-needs-new-pact-on-education.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

CHARACTERISING A *CATHOLIC* SCHOOL

What is it, then, that characterizes a *catholic* school? A Catholic school is a school that lives, breathes, and welcomes according to the whole, the *kata-holon*; in other words, in view of the mystery. But what does that mean? It means a multitude of things; but I’d like to go straight to what is the essential. A catholic school is a school that is marked by openness to the mystery. And this translates directly into it being a place that is open to, and that welcomes *the other*.

A school in the Catholic tradition is a place, where any established identity always and immediately gives way to difference; where bounded community always and immediately welcomes the stranger; where the household is always and immediately responsible for the adjoining neighbour, where hospitality always and immediately takes precedence over hostility, and where God is always and immediately welcomed through the other. A school that is deeply Catholic in its Christianity is a school that welcomes the greatest possible spectrum of otherness, extending to the divine, the transcendent, *the Other*. You could say that it is open along a horizontal axis to the *other*, the neighbour, and along a vertical axis to the *Other* (majuscule), the divine; *and these are inseparable*. A Catholic school is not a place that closes its doors, but one that opens them again and again and again through time and human history. In the recent Instruction from the *Congregation for Catholic Education*, entitled ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ we read: ‘The Church’s educational proposal is not only addressed to her children, but also to “all peoples [to promote] the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human.”’⁵ The Catholic school is marked by a commitment to welcoming, encouraging, enabling, and being supportive of the other. Recently, too, Pope Francis observed that given that our time is ‘marked by so many social, political and even health-related tensions,’ there is a growing temptation to consider the other person as ‘a stranger or an enemy.’ This, he says, denies the real dignity of the other. Against this, he stresses that the Church, ‘from the very beginning of her mission’ has always proclaimed the unconditional value of the human person.⁶ He remarked, further, to the De La Salle

5 Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 13 (note that the internal citation is from the Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, No. 3).

6 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-01/pope-francis-discourse-congregation-doctrine-faith.print.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

Brothers: ‘Indeed, you are on the frontline in educating to pass from a closed to an open world; from a throwaway culture to a culture of care; from pursuing partisan interests to pursuing the common good.’⁷

This welcoming of the other is not merely to be understood in the terms of being friendly and ‘nice’ in that conventional sense of civilized, social exchange and politeness. No. It’s welcoming their very otherness as a gift or a richness for the self. Again, Pope Francis has remarked: ‘In the history of every person, the Father sees again the story of his Son who came down to earth. Every human story has an irrepressible dignity.’⁸

I think that religion teachers have a very important role to play in connecting this charism of openness toward the other to faith identity and enabling young people in understanding that this is not accessory or incidental but is at the very heart of Catholic identity. Indeed, the Instruction that I just mentioned pointed out that ‘the Catholic school prepares pupils to exercise their freedom responsibly, forming an attitude of openness and solidarity.’⁹ The other is valued in being other. And there can be no question of rejecting, or converting, or denigrating the other’s identity (no matter what it might be). This is the real challenge and privilege of a Catholic school: to be Catholic is to live, and work, and hope according to the whole, the universal, the mystery of God among us in Christ.

This is to nourish one’s own Catholic identity as an identity that is open, that welcomes the Other/other and responds to the other as part of one’s own self-understanding. I’m not saying anything here that you don’t, to some degree, already know. On *Nationwide*, recently, there was a report on a wonderful initiative in Mount Sion Secondary School in Waterford Diocese. The school has become what’s termed a ‘school of sanctuary’ for students, who are coming to Ireland from all kinds of complex backgrounds, many traumatic, where they are welcomed, supported, and educated so that they might come to be integrated healthily into Irish society as valued members of our communities.¹⁰ The school now has 37 nationalities and belongs in that great tradition of Edmund Rice. In the interview, the Deputy Principal, Bill Doherty, said: ‘we

7 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-de-la-salle-brothers-world-needs-new-pact-on-education.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

8 Pope Francis, ‘Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 54th World Communications Day,’ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20200124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html (accessed 25 May 2022).

9 Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 16.

10 Documentary, RTE, 17 January 2022.

have found our heart and our soul again’! It’s an extraordinary statement. And the School Sanctuary Leader, Narrell Byre, said that ‘we have found our mission again. We welcome all faiths and no faith.’ And strikingly, she told us that on Fridays Muslim students are released to go to the mosque for prayer and they come back afterwards to continue with their day’s schooling. That is a credible Catholic school in the best sense of the word. A Catholic school is not a place of uniformity, conformism, and platitude, but a place of diversity, of difference (in every sense), of dialogue, of intellectual rigour, and of creativity. And this, in the name of faith for those, who belong explicitly to the Catholic faith community; and this, in view of faith for those who follow any one of the many diverse paths in life.¹¹

There is one thing, however, that I would quibble with, and that is the very *need* to designate the school as a ‘school of sanctuary.’ Why? Surely, every Catholic school should be a school of sanctuary. Surely, no matter who knocks on the door, they should be welcomed. Surely, every Catholic school should be a safe place for every student. A Catholic school should be a school of sanctuary for the believing student, for the searching student, for the agnostic student, for the atheist student, for the LGBTIQ+ student, for the lost student, for the vulnerable student, for the migrant student, for your son or daughter, for your niece or nephew, for your grandchild, and, even, (and this might be a surprising one) for your own inner child.¹² We need to ensure that there is no safer place for our humanity than in our schools. Everyone should know explicitly that this is the Catholic ethos of our schools. And, surely, all parents or guardians – no matter what their personal convictions might be – should know and understand that their son or daughter is in a safe place, when they attend a Catholic school; and this on every level, body, mind, spirit, and soul (even if they do not recognize these last two categories). When a Catholic school works, and lives, and breathes in such a spirit, they are a mighty witness to the magnanimity of the Christian faith, to service of the other, to a real openness that mirrors transcendence, and that gracefully reflects the love that God has communicated to each one of us through his Son. As teachers of religion in a Catholic faith school, this is the foundational vision, and it is your privilege to translate this into the structures, processes, and exchanges of day-

11 See Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 28.

12 On the importance of being mindful of LGBTIQ+ students, see Pope Francis’s letter to Fr. James Martin, SJ. For the relevant information, see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-letter-fr-martin-lgbt-outreach-questions.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

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to-day life in your classroom and, even, out into the wider school community.

May I go back very briefly to the issue of different religions and none. Given the diversity in our present culture, Catholic schools should not be mono-religious if they are to be genuinely *catholic* schools. If they are mono-religious (or predominantly so), then they are likely to be replicating the dynamics of a religious sect, which defines itself and affirms its identity over against other persons and other groups in the culture. It does not welcome difference, and it may well believe that it is the only space of redemption.

It must, however, be said that a Christian cannot say that all religions are equal. This would be dishonest and would not be in conformity with the truth of the Gospel, where Christ is recognized to be the one and only mediator.¹³ But if I boast of this, to say, or even think, that ‘I am better than someone else,’ then that is a monstrosity. It is condescending toward the other and embarrassingly arrogant of the self. It is, in fact, precisely because ‘I belong to the Catholic faith’ that I can say to a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or an atheist: ‘You, yes you, are, perhaps, closer to God than me!’¹⁴ It is so important to understand this; and if you don’t understand it, you have not understood the *catholicity* of Christian faith. There is no difficulty about saying this, precisely in the name of faith: ‘you, may be closer to God, our loving Father, than I am.’ And, once you recognize this, it is immensely liberating. This invites one to be more deeply Christian in one’s faith-life, to be more firmly catholic, and, at the same time, to be more generously open. This is what you find at the heart of Christianity; the more that you are rooted in Catholic faith – with all that it brings in terms of singularity and surprise – the more that you are open to the universal, the whole, the kata-holon. Recently, Pope Francis said that the church must be a ‘church with open doors.’¹⁵ A Catholic school must not have closed doors and, in particular, it does not close its doors to any group in society. There may be principles of limitation in terms of school numbers, etc., but any such principles must apply to everyone, equally and at absolutely no cost to anyone’s personal identity.¹⁶ The idea that a Catholic school is reserved to a particular group in society is a tragic contradiction of what it is to be a community of Christian faith that serves the

13 See *Dei verbum*, no. 2.

14 See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Dieu, un détour inutile ?* Entretiens avec Dominique Saint-Macary et Pierre Sinizergues (Paris : Du Cerf, 2020), 86-87.

15 <https://www.ncregister.com/news/pope-francis-the-church-is-called-to-be-a-church-with-open-doors>

16 And even in such a situation, the limitation itself is subject to the preferential option for the poor.

universal redemptive order (or in more theological language, that is the sacrament of salvation).

THE CLASSROOM AND THE RELIGION TEACHER

I’d like to talk a little about the religion teacher and the classroom because to be in the classroom is to be in a very unusual place in our culture (and we rarely reflect on it). In fact, it’s a precarious kind of place. There are tectonic plates moving all around you, and teachers are on the fault lines, so to speak. I’m going to call the precise place of the classroom an ‘inbetween’ because it is neither here nor there. I must add, immediately, that my inspiration here is Plato and not the TV programme, ‘The Inbetweeners.’

Plato used the term *μεταξύ* (*metaxy* or *metaxis*) to describe the condition of “in-betweenness,” which, for him, is one of the characteristics of being human. And, much later, speaking of the school, Hannah Arendt sees its importance and its vitality in being a special kind of institution that is placed between the private domain of the home and the public domain of the world. It is that place, where the child or young person can make the transition from the intimacy of the family home to the rough and tumble of life in the wider world.¹⁷ As an ‘inbetween’ the classroom might be best characterised as being ‘neither one, nor the other’: neither the home, nor the world; neither the past, nor the future; neither the parent, nor the politician; neither the child, nor the adult; neither the believer, nor the unbeliever; neither certainty, nor scepticism; neither the rigorist, nor the anarchist, and so on. Teachers, and especially RE teachers, live the ‘inbetween’ in a way that is unique in our culture. And that is your art; you stand and persevere in the ‘inbetween,’ when others would be tempted to move to one of the complementary poles. It is precisely such a place that encourages and promotes growth in mind and spirit, while staying firmly rooted in the life and world of the young person. It engenders freedom, while providing guidance and protection; it encourages growth and movement, while giving support and sustenance; it heals and nurtures, while being proactive and discrete; it fosters, and does not limit; it leads, and does not control; and so on. It is vital to recognize this condition of being ‘inbetween’ and the energy that goes with it.

As teachers this is your place, too; and a special kind of responsibility and privilege goes with being there. I would hazard saying that it is even a greater privilege to be a *religion* teacher in

17 See Hannah Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Education,’ in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London, Penguin, 1993), 173-96, at 188-89.

that space. For Plato the ultimate characterization of the state of 'inbetweenness' is a spirituality, whereby we humans recognize that we are suspended between the human and the divine.¹⁸ And religion teachers, more than any other, honour this more wholesome horizon of the human condition in the school. In many ways you could say that the most significant journey of transition in this 'inbetween' is the *journey of the soul* that each student will make during these school years. This is so since it is during these years that as a young person you begin to become conscious of your own identity as unique to you, as being independent, as being free and self-determining. As part of this journey, you discover, importantly, the foundations of your interior life, where faith-life begins to blossom as a personal discovery, as an appropriation, and as a commitment. What this means for the teacher, more than anything else, is that you must trust in God at work in every person's life. For the young person, this is very often a lonesome journey; but a necessary one, that mirrors each person's journey into God.

The paradox of this 'inbetween' for the teacher of religion is that you strive to give 'direction,' and, yet, you know that you cannot give 'directives.' God's spirit is always there before you and will be there after you. You never come first; you never stand in that primary place that is the other's interiority, and to attempt to do so is spiritual abuse. When young people begin to discover this mystery for themselves, this gift of the interior life, then, they are being equipped magnificently in facing the journey and the challenges of life. And they can only discover that interior gift if you know when to step back and allow it to emerge with integrity for them. Your task is one of enabling, facilitating, and opening possibilities.

This is genuinely a challenge. Teaching in religious education and working in faith development calls, in many ways, for more not less. And when I say 'challenge,' I don't mean it in that euphemistic sense, whereby it is used³especially in public discourse⁴to avoid the word 'problem.' Religious education is *not* a problem. On the contrary, it is one of the most exciting things that you could possibly do in life. But it is a challenge for everyone; and it's a challenge in the best sense of that word; you, too, grow, learn, and expand, when you take up this challenge. You promote newness of life, growth, and contribute to engendering the future. Young people do not want experts, and they do not want answers. And this is true even when they look for them; *what they want, and need, is to learn how to*

18 We humans are suspended on a web of polarities: the one and the many, eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love and hate, to name but a few.

answer their own questions. The temptation is to short circuit this process and give them pre-prepared, ready-made, and (necessarily) relatively trite responses. But when you do that, you destroy their emerging interiority. That is why so often conscientious silence can be very powerful; it allows the real response to emerge from the young mind and heart that is beginning the adventure of life. And in such a case, affirmation is all that is required.

What young people need in the religious education classroom more than anything else are people, who are competent and who care. And people who care try and try again; they do not give up, or abandon, or resign to indifference. *It is the journey that matters.* Young people respond best to care for them, while respecting them, on the one hand, and, on the other, giving them the space that they might need to find their own way. A Catholic school has the breath to facilitate this because it is open always to the whole, to the infinite, to the mystery.

THE TENSIONS OF TEACHING

I’d like, now, ever so briefly, to step into the classroom. The moment that you acknowledge the transcendent, God, the infinite, the loving father of us all, then, you are thrown into a foundational relativity.¹⁹ Nothing, nor no one, can take the place of God; and everything that we do and say is relative to that centre point. And this means that relativity is not a bad word. On the contrary, it reflects the fundamental human relationship to the transcendent as our origin, and as the only absolute. It is humanizing in the deepest Christian sense, and it acknowledges, implicitly, our need for redemption.

In the classroom there is a particular expression of this relativity, which can be characterised, schematically, as a quadrangle (let me call it, the matrix of relativity), whereby the corner points are marked out as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Young person (as student) | Parents / Guardians |
| Your own person (as teacher) | Church as Community |

In this matrix of relativity, the four corners are always relative to one another; they do not stand independently of each other in the

¹⁹ The moment you use the word relativity, you implicitly imply, equally, the word absolute. There is a mutuality, which is not a mirroring of equals.

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classroom.²⁰ As teacher, and especially as a teacher in religious education, you are called to negotiate and balance the tensions, the expectations, the demands, the agreements, the disagreements, the hopes, the fears, etc., in this relativity. And *this balancing is the work of love for your students*. To renege on this, is really to abandon them to competing forces, which are often beyond their capabilities at this point in the journey of life. Remember the classroom is an ‘inbetween.’

It is vital to see that you do this with the young person’s wellbeing as the priority in your deliberations, in whatever you might suggest, and in whatever action that you might need to take. This you do in your professional capacity, and I would hope that you have whatever institutional supports that you might need in doing this. It is, further, your dignity as a professional, as a person whose special responsibility is to care for the next generation, and, indeed, as a person of faith.

Inevitably, working in religious education raises questions about your own identity, faith-wise and otherwise; your own relationship to the transcendent, your own interior intimacy, and your own connection to the institutional expression of church (which may well be one of reservation, and even great reservation, given all that has come to light in the past number of years). No one should expect you to betray your interior forum when you stand in the classroom. There are, of course, appropriate boundaries, and I’m sure that you know, better than I, how to maintain them. It is, I believe, however, vital that you are true to yourself, especially with young persons, because they know when you are and when you are not. And the moment that they recognize that you, too, are on a journey, they will trust you, because you will mirror for them, what it is that they are beginning to discover, negotiate, and seek to live out.

Clearly, you should never say or do anything in the classroom that violates your own conscience, and when, for example, it is clear that your position differs from that, say, of parents or guardians, or the institutional expression of church (as you understand it), then it is important to communicate the relativity of the various positions.²¹ And, clearly, responding to a 14-year-old is not the same as responding to a 17-year-old. If you do not communicate

20 And each corner is marked by a living infinity that cannot be further reduced. Clearly, this matrix is limited to my consideration of the Catholic school and the classroom.

21 ‘Catholic Schools will respect the freedom of conscience of teachers in matters of personal religious belief and practice’ (Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), art. 151); See also Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 49.

within this matrix of relativity, then you are in danger of falling into an abuse of your position, and in doing so, doing yourself and others great damage. And young people themselves, in time, will realize this, when they themselves are adults and look back on their formative years.

BEHOLD THE FUTURE: *SYNODALITY*

The young person or child is *the* agent of change. We all know this; whoever has most influence over the child, whoever convinces the young person decides to a significant degree the future (that’s why people get so uptight about teachers and especially teachers of religion; about what they say and teach in the classroom, because it has a decisive influence on the future).

Of course, what we often forget is that it is not, in fact, the teacher that is the real point of power; it the young person that is the incarnation of the new. And a significant part of your task and responsibility is to protect the young person’s developing interior life from all who would seek to manipulate them to suit their own ends, who would try to secure their own future through them. You must do this in name of the dignity of each person, born in the image and likeness of God. You are a guardian in the special place that is the classroom, where the seeds of interiority are nurtured so that in time each young person might stand in adult freedom, and, looking back, will see that they were indeed nourished, cared for, protected, respected, and encouraged on their unique journeys of life and faith.

When you meet and engage with young people as I am suggesting, then, what you are really doing is teaching them, preparing them for, and showing them how to live together in difference, how to support one another, how to respect one another, and, ultimately, how to walk together. That is what Pope Francis means by *synodality*, and he tells us that is the major task for the Church in our present time. I’d like to give the last word to one of your students. It’s a poem called ‘Silver Chain’ by Chelsea Bowes, who is, I believe, a Junior Certificate Student.

Silver Chain
by Chelsea Bowes, St Kevin’s College

Silver, enchanting,
Full of memories that haunt me,
Beautifully detailed
With a long chain of ancestry.
Something so small,

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Holding generations of secrets
Young and old, good and bad.
From the Easter Rising to the twenty first century,
From all the people who have come before me,
Giving a sense of responsibility.
An honour it feels, entrusting me
With something so rich in history,
Of something so much bigger than me –
This little heart of mine.²²

22 This poem is taken from a collection by students participating in the 'We Write What We Like' project, supported by CDETBSCC (City of Dublin Education and Training Board Sports & Cultural Council) and JCSP (Junior Certificate Schools Programme), Poetry Ireland, <https://www.poetryireland.ie/education/poems-from-schools/> (accessed 25 January 2022). And St. Kevin's College is under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust in Finglas, Dublin 11, Ireland.

God Talk. There is no doubting the fact that the divine appears differently to different people, even in the same situation. If I manage to make people feel safe enough to speak candidly, even in dogmatic religious groups, I am amazed how much variation there is in personal belief. To some, God is an impersonal force, to others personal, to some an energy, to others a being. Some people experience many gods and spirits, some only one.

– NICHOLAS PETER HARVEY and LINDA WOODHEAD, *Unknowing God: Toward a Post-Abusive Theology*, Cascade Books, 2022, p.6