An investigation into factors contributing to atheism in adolescents attending a Catholic school.

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Introduction:
Identity is a sense of self, a knowing and understanding of personal beliefs and values. One’s identity is formed over time, through interactions in the micro, meso, and macro levels of society. One aspect of a person’s identity is a beliefs system including religious beliefs, which can alter values and behaviour. Within my research, my primary objective was to investigate the growing number of atheist students in my Catholic school. I aimed to investigate their attitudes towards authority, and variables influencing their decision. My topic is an investigation of the influencing factors for adolescents to become atheists in a Catholic school.

As people may perceive atheism as a rejection of authority, I aimed to see if there was in fact a correlation between their attitudes towards authority, and rejection of religion. I was also interested to find out what impact the authoritative nature of the Catholic Church had, and if technologies, media, family, and conformity also influenced their decision.

Attending small Catholic schools my entire life I had never come into contact with atheists until high school. Various students then became open regarding their rejection of religious ideologies. I thus chose this topic as I was fascinated with this juxtaposition, with students torn between rejecting religion, and being in an environment that actively practises one. I had also recently been to Poland on a Catholic youth pilgrimage, increasing my interest in the notion of faith in the lives of young people.

This topic was a relatively easy choice for me to pursue, I had direct access to many primary sources, as I have a number of peers and friends who are atheists. Secondary resources regarding my topic were more generalised towards atheists in society, such as census data, and the rise of young atheists. This increased difficulty in my research as secondary sources were scarce and not specific to my topic. This could have benefitted me too, as the potential for bias was reduced due to a wider range.

Integrated throughout my PIP are course concepts such as identity, beliefs, change, continuity, authority, socialisation, conformity, technologies, globalisation, ideologies, empowerment, and power as they are directly related to my topic. Particularly in relation to the rejection of the authority of the church and family as a form of empowerment.

My primary research comes from three focus groups I have conducted with various students. I found focus groups were particularly useful for my narrow topic as it is requires personal in-depth experience. Thus, focus groups allowed access to this information in a timely manner,
rather than interviews. Focus groups were also useful as people bounced ideas off each other, especially regarding perceptions of the Catholic Church’s authority, and factors influencing their decision.

My cross-cultural perspective was analysing the differences and similarities between the male and female atheist students. This enhanced my knowledge on the variables and factors influencing the student’s decision. Investigating continuities and changes is a crucial aspect of my PIP. The rise of atheism in the last one hundred years outlined through census data, especially in younger generations, directly relates to my PIP. Thus investigating the response to this evolutionary change through media articles, and the effect it has on society, became important in my research.

I believe that my topic allows a better understanding of society and culture as a fusion of personal experience and public knowledge can help identify the characteristics of the rising atheist population and the reasons for this path. It will help understanding the evolving secular culture, and the break with a long tradition of institutionalised religion. It will also increase understanding on the variables influencing atheism, and rebellion in adolescents.


Log:

When I began the process of my personal interest project (PIP) I initially began thinking about what my interests were. I thought about the culture in which I was raised and societies ideologies. During July/August 2016 I travelled on a Catholic pilgrimage with my diocese to World Youth Day in Poland. Being with young people of faith stimulated my interest in the idea of faith as a young person. I have friends attending my school who identify as atheists, and have always contemplated the factors contributing to becoming an atheist whilst attending a Catholic school.

During November of 2016 our Society and Culture class were writing personal reflections on various topics, and one student’s response interested me. This was why they decided to become an atheist in a Catholic school and variables contributing to this. Prior to this I was already considering following a PIP topic regarding young people and faith. This reflection sparked my interest in lack of faith as a young person.

I first gathered secondary research regarding my topic such as news articles about young people and atheism, people who grew up Catholic and became atheists, and the notion of atheism as a defiance against authority. However, these articles were very broad and not exactly specific to my topic. This meant my deeper understanding would come from primary research.

Determining the specific investigation for my PIP required narrowing down my understanding of atheism in a Catholic school. I chose my specific topic after I conducted a small practise focus group in February 2017, with three atheist students. Thus, I developed a level of understanding in which I could choose a topic. I learnt much from these students, such as their reasons for becoming an atheist and thoughts on the Catholic Church.

After much thought, I came to the conclusion I would investigate the variables influencing one’s decision to become an atheist, and the correlation between atheism and rebelling against authority.

After this conclusion I was able to compile questions I needed to investigate, and thus I conducted a series of three focus group sessions with six different atheist students attending my school. This occurred over the course of February, and March.
I had to ensure that there were no ethical problems in my research by making sure these students were comfortable with me using their personal experience as part of my analysis as some of these students were active members in the school community.

After my series of focus groups were complete, and I had conducted secondary research, I started writing my central material. This was a long and rewarding process, of synthesising information I had recorded from my focus groups and removing irrelevant information. My ideas progressed over the months, and I managed to feel satisfied with the conclusion of my central material and PIP.
Chapter one: Attitudes towards authority as a contributing factor to atheism:

Many people are led to believe that the major contributing factor to atheism is a rejection of authority. This is outlined on many internet discussion boards such as Quora, to which an atheist man of 20 years, Christian Winter wrote in response to the rejection of authority:

1 This question seems to imply that the reason atheists don't believe in gods is that they are unwilling to accept authorities as a whole and must therefore also reject human authorities.

Similarly, young people can be stereotyped as having a negative attitude towards authority, and parents often view the rejection of religious values associated with normal development. Rather than, a consequence of a valid decision. This is highlighted on parenting blogs such as Kars4Kids, encouraging parents to view their child’s atheism as merely a rebellious ‘phase’:

2 If your adolescent child reject your religion, the practices he or she was raised with since birth, it’s not just difficult. It can create family discord and personal heartache. But rejection of your religion, opposition of practices, questioning doctrine and whatever else a teen does to disrupt the status quo are really all a part of developmental rebellion.

This has led to the common belief that a rejection of Christian religious beliefs may be due to the resentment of power and authority especially that of the Catholic Church. Atheists thus, may be perceived as seeking self-empowerment, and or undergoing a rebellious ‘phase’.

People may also hold the belief that atheists have a negative attitude to all forms of authority, including our governments and laws. This diminishes atheism to purely a rejection of authority, leading to a distrust from the wider society. The University of British Colombia’s Will Gervais hypothesised that if atheists reject the authority of God, society misinterpret that they reject the human forms of authority which regulate society and are an integral part of our culture. This is attributed to the preconceived notion that respectable people hold religious values.

When we know that somebody believes in the possibility of divine punishment, we seem to assume they are less likely to do something unethical. Based on this logic, Gervais and Norenzayan hypothesized that reminding people about the existence of secular authority figures, such as policemen and judges, might alleviate people’s prejudice towards atheists.³

This led to my interest in uncovering atheist students’ opinions on authority, and to what degree they both accept and reject authority. I also aimed to uncover the key factors contributing to their beliefs, and attitudes. Prior to delving into my research I took into account ethical concerns surrounding my project, such as the fact that I myself attend a Catholic school, and some students who were interviewed were leaders of the school community. I would also have to take into account my own bias towards this research, as I myself am Catholic, and know some students interviewed. I have aimed to eliminate any bias through objective research, but need to acknowledge some subjectivity in my analysis.

A rejection of general authority and influencing factors:

The Catholic tradition in particular, emphasises that the one true source of authority are the teachings of God through Jesus Christ, to be found in the Bible.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. (Romans 13)⁴

However, this direct quote from the Bible emphasises that in fact, the clergy do hold some divine authority, in particular, its teaching authority called the “magisterium”. This is an authoritarian hierarchical structure of Priests, Bishops, Archbishops, increasing in authority and power until it reaches the Pope. This apparent contradiction of authority between what the Bible predominately teaches, that is God is the sole authority to man, and the authoritative hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church can lead to confusion. This contradiction has led me to believe this could be a key contributing factor as to why young people have started to question belief, and Catholic authority in recent years.

The questions that became persistently obvious were Are the atheist students acting out of rebellion to the religious institution they may have grown up in to assert their own

individuality? Furthermore, has this resulted in a negative attitude towards all authority, and that in particular of the Catholic Church?

A female student, Josie 17, in my society and culture class wrote a personal reflection on her experience and factors contributing to her atheist beliefs, occurring during her time attending a Catholic school and growing up in a Catholic household with religious parents. She stated:

*I first realised I didn’t believe in God when I was in year 8 of high school, and the main factors that pushed me to that belief, was, that in my experience, Christianity was suffocating and restricting my growth as a person.*

Josie would have been around the 13-14 age group in this year of school when making this decision. She decided that religion was limiting on her identity formation, and thus decided she needed to remove herself order to be able to develop her own identity. This could be a form of rebellion, explained by Dr Carl E Pickhardt

*In mid adolescence (13-15), during the late middle school and early high school years, most rebellion is about creating needed differentiation to experiment with identity and needed opposition to gather power of self-determination.*

This statement addresses the concept that teenage rebellion against authority may be necessary empowerment in the formation of one’s sense of identity. Becoming evident as perhaps a key contributing factor in the rejection of religious authority. Dr Carl E Pickhardt and the personal reflection seem to correlate and support the previous assumption made by some members of society, that atheists may merely choose their beliefs on the basis to exercise individualistic ideologies, and self-empowerment.

I decided that a series of focus groups with six atheist students who attend my Catholic school, would aid me in finding detailed and personal answers surrounding their attitudes towards authority. All students who were interviewed were in the 17-18 year old age bracket. Three students were male and three were female, hopefully aiding me obtaining an accurate perspective from both the genders. Interestingly, two of the male students interviewed were school leaders, as well as one of the female students. All three of them are active members and representatives of the school community. Their status and role in their meso world

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5 Josie, personal reflection written in society and culture class, December 2016.
perhaps already subverted the notion of rebellious teenagers, hell-bent on resisting authority figures within the Catholic system of churches and schools.

When the focus group were asked their opinion regarding authority in general, such as laws and governments there was a contiguous agreement that these authorities were necessary for society in order to protect individuals and maintain order. One student Lachlan, 18, stated:

*Laws and authorities are necessary to keep social order, you have to respect that.*

No one in the group had a negative opinion on authority, and four out of the six remained neutral to the idea of authorities and governments. The other two had very positive attitudes towards these. This helped me develop an understanding as to general attitudes towards authority of atheist students. Interestingly, they regarded authority as something necessary for society, and without holding negative or resentful attitudes.

Students were then asked if they were “rebellious” in nature, or if they tended to be more rebellious than their peers. Fascinatingly all of the students found the idea quite amusing that they were in any form rebellious. Four of the students found the idea quite humorous, and each student replied with a strong “No” to the question.

This may be a reflection of the notion again raised by Dr Carl E Pickhardt, because the students are aged 17-18, they are past mid adolescents (13-15) and thus have already experimented with rebellion actions during identity formation process. This is evident as when students were asked the ages they were consciously aware to the fact they were an atheist, the answer was the same for students growing up in religious households. With 11-16 years old the ages they were aware, reinforcing perhaps mid adolescence rebellion.

When students were asked if they believed that their atheism was a rejection of authority one of the female students, Claire 17, from a non-religious family stated that is wasn’t a rebellion.

*No because religion and especially Christianity is not compulsory, so it’s not a rebellion because you are not breaking any rules or laws.*

All the students agreed with her answer. This was a fascinating point made, in the sense that religion is a freely chosen acceptance of authority. Organised religion is an institutional

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7 Lachlan, 18, focus group 2 conducted February 20, 2017.
9 Claire, 17, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017.
power that has authority and can dictate one’s life, but only if they want it to. One chooses to adhere to and practice a religion. In turn I realised, choosing to reject religious notions and ideologies presented is not so much a form of rebellion, but rather exercising religious freedom in modern society. Despite the fact religion is a choice, choosing to reject religion is still considered to be non-conformist, to the view held by millions globally. The view is despite not having evidence or not being forced into belief, many can still believe in something unprovable. This view was not the case for the students based upon the information I received, faith alone was not enough to justify belief in a higher power. 

When I asked about their opinion of the Catholic Church’s authority, there was a resoundingly similar response. The student’s did not consider the Catholic to hold authority in their lives, but they still respected the authority figures. Colm, 18, stated;

I don’t consider any of the clergy to have any authority in my life. I have met the Bishop and other priests. Although I don’t believe they hold authority in my life, I still respect them as elders of the community.

Interestingly, all of the students held the same view. They respected the Catholic clergy as members of the community, but didn’t believe they held authority in their lives. This was the opposite of rebellious and resentful acts against the church as they held no negative attitudes. When the group was asked if they had been rebellious during the 13-15 year old age range, the consensus was the same. None perceived themselves or each other to be anymore rebellious than their peers during this age. In fact a number of the students believed they were less rebellious than their peers, Andrew 18 stated;

I think I was a little bit of a teacher’s pet and always conformed to the rules when I was around that age, I actually took pride in the fact I wasn’t as defiant as others in my class.10

Josie 17 also stated;

I was a little defiant during that age group, but not anymore than anyone else in my classes, in fact probably less.11

10 Andrew, 18, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017.
11 Josie, 17, focus group 3 conducted March 18, 2017.
I found it interesting that none of these students had not even considered themselves a little bit more rebellious towards authority than their peers. However, the fact they were less rebellious seemed to suggest that they were more non-conformist than their peers. Some stated during this time were entirely conforming to rules, and did not want to be as rebellious as peers. Suggesting that this conformist behaviour to the rules was paradoxically non-conformist behaviour in comparison to their peers, who may have been acting more rebellious than the atheist students. This notion of atheist students being less conformist to their peers seemed logical, as they were deviating from societal norms of holding religious beliefs while also refusing to conform to the institutional power of the Catholic Church. Through my engagement with these students I found a difference in gender influenced atheism as a form of non-conformist behaviour, and engagement in school life.

For instance, the 3 male students I interviewed, two were school leaders and one was not. The two who were school leaders, did not consider themselves non-conformists, however the one who was not did consider himself more non-conformists. Andrew 18 stated;

*I would say I’m a little non-conformist compared to others at the school, I’m into different sorts of hobbies and T.V shows, like anime.*

There was both similarities and differences with the female students. For instance out of the three female students interviewed, one was a school leader, and the other two were not. The two who were not school leaders both considered themselves more non-conformist than their peers, whereas the female student who was a school leader did not consider herself a non-conformist at all. Claire 17, stated;

*You could consider me a bit of a non-conformist. I’m really into feminism and pacifism, which is another reason why I resonate with atheism.*

This leads me to believe there is either a slight difference in gender in regards to non-conformity associated with atheism or the school leaders were trying to be more conformists than their atheist peers due to their roles and responsibilities. One reason the female student atheists could be more likely to be non-conformist than males is due to the inherent difference in status and class between men and women. With this gender status difference still evident within contemporary society, the female students may be asserting their

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12 Andrew, 18, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017.
13 Claire, 17, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017.
individuality and seeking empowerment through non-conformist behaviour, unlike the male students who may not feel the need to exhaust this method of empowerment.

Male atheists students also differed from the female atheist students interviewed when asked about the factors influencing their conclusion to reject religious beliefs. Whilst it was not considered a rebellious act from both the males and females, the males appeared to question belief and the church before coming to their decision, unlike the female students interviewed. For the males as they questioned belief, it became apparent that it was a matter of reason and logic rather than rejecting authority. The male perspective on this resonates with the research of Hugh Mackay in his book “Beyond Belief”:

If someone tell you that adopting their faith demands that you meet a certain criteria that don’t seem sensible or reasonable, run a mile.14

This is clearly resonated with one of the male students, Andrew, 18, who stated;

I think it was always going to be the outcome, the way it developed for me is I didn’t question the authority of the church when I was younger, but when I did start to question it there were gaps that couldn’t be filled, and that just wasn’t good enough for me.15

The point made by Andrew was agreed upon by the two other male students, this is because there is no way to prove or disprove the existence of a God, highlighted again by Hugh Mackay in his book.

When someone sets out to prove the existence of a God on the basis of either logic or personal experience, their quest is doomed from the start… There is no way to prove – or disprove – such a thing. This is a matter of faith, not logic.16

In turn, the male students were almost setting themselves up to become atheists as faith alone was evidently not enough, which is the foundation for any religious belief.

There was a clear distinction from that of the female students in regards to the faith in religion being unable to answer questions of reason they had. Josie, 17 states;

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14 Mackay, H 2016, Beyond Belief, Macmillan Australia, Australia.
15 Andrew, 18, focus group conducted 2017
16 Mackay, H 2016, Beyond Belief, Macmillan Australia, Australia.
It wasn’t so much gaps in questions I had that led me to reject religion. It was more the fact that organised religion was restricting on my growth, and not following certain guidelines meant I would go to hell.\textsuperscript{17}

These differences in statements between genders was interesting to me as I pondered over the possible differences between male and female atheists. It was clear from all of the male students they questioned the ideologies, however for the females it was clear religion was considered restricting. This female perspective was reinforced by Clare, 17, when asked if she considered restricting religious authorities as a factor in atheism;

\textit{Religion is inherently restricting on identity, for me there are gaps in logic, but the main factor in choosing atheism for me is really just not wanting to be limited to adhere to outdated beliefs my whole life.} \textsuperscript{18}

The main factors for the difference between genders could be for a variety of reasons. Dr Phil Zuckerman hypothesised reasons for the different responses in genders.

\textit{Perhaps boys are socialized to be assertive, independent, and rebellious, while girls are socialized to be acquiescent, relational, and obedient, which then manifests itself later in life.} \textsuperscript{19}

This is a reflection of traditional gender roles within society, as men are stereotypically encouraged to assert individuality and question beliefs, more so than females who may be encouraged to act more passively and with more acquiescence. Thus the factor of questioning the authority and nature of religion may be more prominent in the experience of male atheist students due to the influence of culture and socialisation. More so than the female students who may not have been encouraged to act assertively thus their reasons of confinement and restriction may be attributed to being socialised to accept ideologies easily, and be more passive than males. Thus the females may have felt restricted leading to resentment and rejection of religion.

In conclusion, researching the notion of rejecting authority as the main variable in coming to the conclusion of atheist belief has led me to many answers. It became apparent to me that the atheist students, were in fact not overtly rebellious, or any more rebellious than peers when it

\textsuperscript{17} Josie, 17, focus group 1, conducted February 12, 2017.
\textsuperscript{18} Claire, 17, focus group 2, conducted February 20, 2017.
came to authority. All of the students interviewed both respected, and adhered to authority, both on the meso and macro levels of society.

Interestingly, despite attending a Catholic school, what also became apparent was the students didn’t particularly consider the Catholic Church as an authority figure, and only to those who wished to adhere to the Catholic faith should. The students all appeared to be young people of intellect, reason, and maturity. Each had reasonable opinions and grounds for their atheism, such as questioning something that seemed illogical to them, and on the pursuit to form their true identity without restrictions

It can also be concluded that aspects of the students have levels of non-conformity. However this non-conformity cannot be generalised to be a significant factor due to the small group of student’s interview, and the fact everybody has levels of non-conformity. The students reject religious ideologies, rather than resent authority as their opinions were respectful and largely positive. This became the most interesting finding throughout my research.
Chapter 2: Other variables such as the changing value of religion, and the changing value of the Catholic Church.

As I had researched the notion of rejecting authority as a contributing factor in student’s decision to become an atheist, I also wanted to understand and investigate other variables and factors that may have had an influence on this decision. There were a number of variables I could investigate, however the ones that stood out to me were the increasing trend of irreligion in Australia, and the scandals associated with the Catholic Church coming to light in recent years.

Religious affiliation in Australia:

Religious affiliation as a whole has changed drastically over the last 40 years as highlighted through census data. With the most recent 2016 census data, it is clear that the number of Australians, especially young Australians, are embracing an increasingly secular society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics “No religion” Is now Australia’s largest religion, with an increase from 6.7% in 1971 to 22% in 2011, to most recently 30.1% in 2016.20

Evident in the graph above, courtesy of The Australian Bureau of Statistics\textsuperscript{21}, younger Australians are diverging from religious beliefs at a rapid pace. Whilst recent census data has not yet outlined the precise number of atheists in 2016, The Guardian article outlines;

\begin{quote}
The “no religion” category includes atheist, secularists, and those who are agnostic. Census officials noted that while the question on religious affiliation had changed slightly, the findings were still significant.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Whilst there was resistance to this change, outlined in the news.com.au article;

\begin{quote}
...some have suggested marking “no religion” could in fact lead to Australia being declared a “Muslim country”... “Even though you may now have no religion, please consider entering the religion you were christened or born into, when answering this question. Otherwise in time Australia will officially be declared to be a Muslim country – because the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census will reflect this.” \textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

A Christian ethic action group, Salt Shakers, in 2016 resisted this secular change prior to the census, arguing that if the category of “No Religion” increases, Australia will falsely be declared an Islamic country. However, despite the fact Muslims only make up a small proportion of the population, it is evident that the increase of secularism and atheism has challenged some Christian groups. Thus, the evolutionary change in increasing secularism is having a profound impact throughout Australian society and culture.

The increase in atheism and secularism reflects changing belief systems within Australian culture. This trend can be attributed to the increase of westernisation, which involves increased individualism and materialism. I pondered over the idea that perhaps the students may well be just following a trend which is becoming associated with their age demographic.

When the students were asked about their opinion on atheism as influenced by following these trends, they believed it did have an influence on their decision, but not a profound one, Kiarra 17 stated;

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
Australia is a secular society, knowing that I don’t have to believe in something I don’t have to means I have the freedom to choose not to believe.\textsuperscript{24}

This could mean that as people are recognising others choosing to embrace irreligion, this has influenced their own decision to reject religion. When the students were asked if their decision could be based off of following this secular trend, many believed it did have an influence, but it wasn’t a main factor, Lachlan 18 stated;

\begin{quote}
I mean I guess you could say we are following the secular trend, but it's deeper than just following a trend. It influenced my decision in the sense that it allows more justification of my belief.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

This statement struck my attention as all in the focus group agreed with the student. The secular trend wasn’t a key standalone variable in their decision, but it influenced the students in the sense it helped validate their feelings towards religion. This is supported by Hugh Mackay, who suggests that in our society, every belief and nonbelief system is validated

\begin{quote}
Both fence-sitting and fence jumping are easy to do in any society that sets little store by a person's religious beliefs and vigorously opposes any discrimination on religious grounds.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Thus, the student’s responses and Mackay’s theory correlate, suggesting the irreligion trend is not a main variable in the decision to become atheist. Rather the notion of an increasingly irreligious society has aided the students in the process of accepting atheism as a valid belief system, which they could freely choose to follow. In turn, the increasing irreligious nature of Australia has been a factor in the decision for the student’s to become atheist. However, it does not appear to be the outcome of merely following the trend, but rather and extra push in the atheist direction.

**Issues within the Catholic institution:**

Another variable I investigated which I believed could have influenced the student’s decision to become an atheist whilst attending a Catholic school, was the unfortunate scandals (paedophilia) affiliated with the Catholic Church coming to light. I believed this would be

\textsuperscript{24} Kiarra, 17, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017. 
\textsuperscript{25} Lachlan, 18, focus group 3, conducted March 18, 2017. 
\textsuperscript{26} Mackay, H 2016, Beyond Belief, Macmillan Australia, Australia.
especially influential due to location, as the issue is extensive in the Hunter region, where the students are located.

These scandals have brought about extensive change, by leading to a resentment of Catholic authority figures in the local region and diocese.

Evident in media articles surrounding this such as the Sydney Morning Herald’s “Royal Commission reveals more than 80 church offenders preyed on Hunter children”;

_Catholic Church data supplied to the royal commission shows allegations of child sexual abuse at 12 Hunter Catholic primary and high schools over decades until the 1990s, with 51 per cent of all complaints to Maitland-Newcastle Catholic diocese from men alleging they were molested at Hunter Catholic schools._

This could in fact be the catalyst for transformative change in respect and faith in the authority of the Catholic Church, resulting in disempowerment. I wondered if this scandal had some form of impact with the student’s reasoning to become an atheist. When I asked if these allegations had an impact on their view of the Catholic Church and its congregation one student, Colm 18, answered

_This is one of the reasons I have had a problem with the Catholic Church in the past. It was more the cover up than anything that made me lose some respect for the Church. It doesn’t affect my atheism now but it definitely did in the past._

Evidently the issues faced with the church have had an impact on the decision made by some of the students, with majority agreeing with Colm, that it did have an impact on their decision.

As the article mentions there were 12 schools involved in the Hunter region, I asked if it also affected the student’s families to which one student, Josie 17, replied:

_MY father is still a Catholic despite the incident, but now he doesn’t go to church or read the bible anymore, he’s lost some respect for the Churches authority._

This statement made by Josie resonated with what social researcher Hugh Mackay argues. He comprehensively lists reasons for losing faith and reducing church attendance, one of which

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28 Colm, 18, focus group 2, conducted February 20, 2017.

29 Josie, 17, focus group 2, conducted February 20 2017.
was the loss of integrity of the institutional power of the Catholic Church due to these incidents;

*Child sex-abuse scandals, more than any other single form of institutional corruption, have tarnished the reputation of the church to the extent than many churchgoers have either drifted away in disgust... or adopt a rather cynical, sceptical attitude to it.*

Evidently this notion Mackay presents ties in with the student’s experience, and that of their parents also, with the loss of respect and integrity of these authority figures. One of the female students, Kiarra, 18, who had attended a public school until year 9, was asked if the scandal had an effect on her decision

*I guess I was an atheist before attending a Catholic school, but when I did attend one and these investigation came to light, it did turn me away further. I only found out through the news, and it was never addressed at school.*

Media and technologies have contributed to the access of this type of information by the students. Many said they found out through the evening news, and through people sharing articles on Facebook. With a globalised and technology based society, it wasn’t surprising to find out that the students were also exposed to atheism through media outlets and the internet. When asked if the internet had influenced their perception of the Catholic Church, many of the students agreed that through finding out information online, such as the scandals, they were driven further away from the religion. However, whilst it did drive them further away, none of the students concluded that it was a key contributing factor for their atheism, but rather a further push.

In essence, the scandals surrounding the institutional power of the Catholic Church did impact the respect the students had for its integrity and authority. None of the students though, found it to be a significant variable in their decision to become an atheist, as it still remained to be a question of reason, and exercising growth as a person. These incidents did further influence their rejection of religious beliefs due to the tarnishing of reputation, but it still was not a catalyst for their decision.

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30 Mackay, H 2016, Beyond Belief, Macmillan Australia, Australia.
31 Kiarra, 18, focus group 2, conducted February 20, 2017
It can be concluded from the research I had conducted, for the six atheist students interviewed that the trend of irreligion and scandals within the Catholic Church did influence their atheism. However, for the students these were not so much variables in their decision to become an atheist, but rather helped validate their beliefs, and pushed them further away from the Catholic tradition. These findings were surprising to me as my initial assumption would be the students would be following trends, and hold a resentment to the Catholic Church. Through my researched I discovered that the factors that contributed to their atheism were still questions of logic, and freeing themselves from restrictions. Rather than, trying to follow trends, and loss of respect of the Church.
Conclusion:

My Personal Interest Project:

An investigation into factors contributing to atheism in adolescents attending a Catholic school

Has led me on a passage of research, synthesising new and unexpected information, and towards a deeper understanding of the meaning of faith in the lives of individuals. By interviewing people I knew well, and others not so well, I felt privileged to learn about an integral part of their identity and lives. In investigating this topic, my social and cultural awareness and literacy has been furthered.

My primary objective of research was to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that have contributed to the identity formation of atheism in the lives of students who have been attending a Catholic school, and who also may come from religious households. On this research journey I was fortunate enough to have been opened up to by the students I interviewed. They opened up about personal experiences regarding their identity formation, and perspective on faith.

Before primary research I was unsure if atheism for students attending my Catholic school was a rejection of authority, and rejecting the institutional power of the Catholic Church. I was also unsure of the extent to which the increasingly secular society Australia has become, and the issues surrounding the Catholic Church has had an effect on their decision. However through my series of focus groups and secondary research, I believe the information I have received has given me enough grounds to determine some answers based on the students responses.

I discovered that the factors contributing to their atheism were that of reason, and deep thought rather than rebellion. As I thoroughly investigated their attitudes towards authority in society and of the Catholic hierarchy, I found only positive attitudes that respected both. This contrasted my initial reaction, that rebellion and resentment of authority would have had a profound impact. Based on each student’s subjective experience, they also were paradoxically less rebellious than their peers during the time they were consciously aware of their atheism. I also discovered differences in the cross-cultural component of gender, and the differing factors influencing the male and female students. I found that for the male students atheism was the response to a question of logic and reason, whereas the females felt restricted
by religion. I also discovered the males were more conformist than the female students, however this could be due to the fact they were the school leaders.

I also found that whilst the irreligious trend in Australia and the issues within the Catholic Church did impact their attitudes towards religion, they weren’t significant variables which dictated their decision.

I believe this topic has enabled me a greater understanding of belief systems of individuals, and society as a whole. This topic has increased my social and cultural literacy and I believe my PIP has valuable information to anyone wishing to investigate atheism in adolescents, and in particular those who attend a religious school. It also enables a greater understanding of the attitudes of atheist students towards power and authority.

My PIP has assisted me in developing research skills and methodologies, which I know will aid me throughout future studies. Through the use of focus groups my interview skills have increased, as well as being able to ask relevant questions. My PIP has also taught me the importance of utilising secondary research to enhance my ideas, and discover new pieces of information surrounding my topic.
Annotated Resource List

Primary research

- Focus groups
  - I found focus groups to be the most useful and accurate way I would be able to obtain primary data and research. Focus groups worked particularly well for my topic as I required in-depth personal information surrounding people’s identity and subjective experiences on both the micro and meso levels of society. Focus groups were useful as I aimed to encourage other participants to bounce ideas off of each other, which worked out effectively. I conducted a total of three focus groups over the course of around two months. Each focus group comprised of the same six students as participants. The male students were Colm, Lachlan, and Andrew. The female students were Claire, Josie, and Kiarra. My questions were aimed to be unbiased, in hopes my analysis would reflect this. Whilst I understood my inherent bias, my focus group questions were aimed directly at subjective experiences of the students, hopefully eliminating any of my bias in their responses. I had to take into ethical concerns for my focus groups such as, asking if the students wished to be named or not, as some were active members of the school community. I found that most aspects of the focus groups worked well, such as detailed conversations between students, and responsiveness to questions asked. If there would be any criticisms of the focus groups I conducted, it would have to be some questions asked became irrelevant later on in the writing of my PIP, and some members tended to dominate the conversation over others. Evidently I found my focus groups to be the only primary research method I needed, and gained much knowledge from them about my topic. Using focus groups also extended my research methodology skills and social and cultural literacy.

Secondary research

- This was an online reliable forum response to a question regarding atheism, by an atheist man. This was significantly useful as it directly related to the power dynamic of, authority and rejection of authority in atheism. It was useful as it directly addressed a key topic area within my PIP, that being atheists attitudes towards authority. It helped me put into perspective other atheist’s individual responses to authority, which were similar to the student responses I received. This response was evidently biased towards favouring atheist responses to authority as it was written by an atheist man based on his own opinions. I found it useful in putting into perspective and highlighting the general attitude of an atheist.

- This was an extremely useful blog as it articulated and put into perspective parents attitudes towards atheist adolescents, and the general attitudes of society. It was able to heavily reflect the westernised culture of teen rebellion, and to what degree religion and faith was important on the micro level of society. Evidently this was still a biased response towards atheists from a religious parent’s perspective. Not all the information within the parenting blog was useful as it provided guidelines on how to “deal” with children who may reject religion. The notions evident of using sanctions to discourage atheism in children and non-conformist behaviour also interested me as it emphasised that some parents may view atheism as something that must be “fixed”. In essence this secondary resource and blog outlined the perspective of parents and general society has in relation to atheism as a form of rebellion in adolescents, helping me make sense of my topic.

- This was a particularly useful article as it similarly highlighted the general consensus of society towards atheists. It highlighted key concerns in my PIP such as the notion of rejecting authority, leading to a distrust of atheists from wider society. It also referenced an interesting study made by the University of British Colombia, surrounding the cultural response to people who are atheist. It was
what I would perceive to be an unbiased and rather objective article as it was not based on subjective experience, which was useful. It looked at atheism from a psychological macro perspective also, which in turn has helped deepen my analysis and perspective on the adolescent atheists.

  - As my research as particularly focused around atheism in students who attend a Catholic school, I found it was necessary to research some of the Bible. I thought this was necessary to gain an understanding of its teachings on authority, and teachings which could be considered restricting to the students identity. It was useful as I gained knowledge into what aspects of the Bible could drive individuals away from religion, such as its teachings on gender, and contradicting passages.

  - This was a valuable resource integrated throughout the first chapter of my PIP as I aimed to put into perspective the correlation between rebellion and atheism. It served as an important resource to which I consistently referred to in order to deepen my understanding of rebellion in teen years, and to analyse if this resonated with the students. It was a reliable resource as it was written by a reputable psychologist who has written 15 parenting books. As much as I believe this article and findings would have some elements of bias throughout, I still consider it to be reliable and related to my topic. The only criticism I would have of this article is that it does not make any comparisons of gender, despite due to socialisation there would be differences. The article also mentions the culture of our micro worlds and well as meso levels of society for adolescents, broadening and strengthening its usefulness.
• Mackay, H 2016, Beyond Belief, Macmillan Australia, Australia.
  - This was perhaps the most important and useful secondary resource I could have found for my PIP topic. This book was written by a reputable social researcher, Hugh Mackay, on the notion of religion in Australian society. This book provided extensive information and research surrounding both religion and irreligion in Australia. I found it to be insightful, and at times, enlightening, with the articulate and interesting analysis Mackay made. The book addressed areas specific to my topic such as, factors attributing to atheism, why people are turning away from the Catholic Church, and the relevance of God as an authority figure. Whilst one criticism I had of this resource was the extensiveness of it, meaning quite a large portion of the book was not specific to my PIP, yet it was still intriguing. I believe this book heavily influenced my analysis in my central material, and my use of primary research. It also outlined differences in age, gender, location, on the micro, meso, and macro levels of society. Thus it was an extensive and extraordinarily useful piece of research.

  - This article was particularly useful as it helped me to further my analysis on my cross-cultural perspective of gender, and enhance my understanding. The article was written by a professor of sociology and was a reliable source of information. There were no obvious signs of bias, and was largely unprejudiced. The analysis of gender and religion helped develop my understanding of the differences between genders. Thus enhancing my knowledge of how gender relates to my topic. However not all of the article was useful as much of it focused on holding religious beliefs rather than irreligion. Despite this, I was still able to deepen my understanding of my topic in relation to gender, thanks to this article.

This article was useful as it addressed the most recent census data surrounding changes in religious affiliation in Australia. This was an interesting and interactive article which addressed religion from a macro perspective in Australian society. It analysed religion in Australia based on reliable government data, comparing it to previous census findings. It also made mention of the resistance to this religious change in Australian culture, as outlined in previous articles, one of which I used as a secondary resource. Not everything within this article was useful as it also addressed other areas of census data. Whilst it did focus in particular on religion, it wasn’t completely specific to my PIP, and was more generalised. Although, it did include an atheist perspective which broadened my understanding. This remained a useful article as it articulated recent data in relation to belief systems in Australia.

  - This was a reliable and valid piece of government data. The webpage it was on included an array of interesting graphs and comparisons from previous census years. It outlined the most recent census data in relation to religious beliefs in Australia. It was a macro perspective response to religion in Australia, and whilst it was not directly related to atheism, it aided me in understanding the changing nature of religious beliefs. The only criticism I had of this resource, is data was still in the early stages of being released, and thus data surrounding just atheism had not been released. Despite this, it was useful as it conveyed fluently on the macro level, the changing value of religious belief in relation to age, gender and ethnicity.


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- This article was very similar to others which addressed the most recent census data releases. This was a useful article as it analysed the census data more so than others I came across. This may not have been a total positive as it may involve some level of bias, but from my perspective I found it to be objective and reliable. It was not completely useful in the sense only a small portion of the article addressed religious beliefs in Australia. From what was written on religion however, was in fact analytical and interesting. This resource was useful in putting into perspective religion on the macro level once again.

- Chang, C 2016, ‘Unholy war over Census question on religion’, News.com.au, 5 August, accessed 18 January 2017, <http://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/unholy-war-over-census-question-on-religion/news-story/c6171ebdad35a6614d09be493aa1fff2>. This was an extremely interesting and useful article as it addressed the resistance to religious change within Australia. Within this article I found limited inclusion of bias, as it reported on a Christian groups aim to diminish non-religion in Australia through the use of ethnocentrism. It also included an atheist perspective of why Australians should choose “No Religion” in the census, which furthered my knowledge of an atheist perspective on the macro level of atheism in Australian culture. This furthered my understanding of my topic by addressing resistance to change in society, and the extent of the effect atheism has had. A large portion of this article related to atheism in society, and the perception and misconceptions it may face. This was both useful and reliable, as well as articulate in information it presented. The only criticism I would have of this resource is it did not note differences between peoples and atheism, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and location.

- McCarthy, J 2016, ‘Royal Commission reveals more than 80 church offenders preyed on Hunter children’, Sydney Morning Herald, 6 December, accessed 13 January 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/royal-commission-reveals-more-than-80-church-offenders-preyed-on-hunter-children-20161205-gt4mpt.html>. This was an interesting article I stumbled across which aided me in understanding the issues within the Catholic Church. Thus I determined this as perhaps a variable
for atheism in the adolescent students. It addressed key issues within the Catholic Church on the meso level of society in the location of the students interviewed and researched. Whilst there would be elements of bias present, it articulated factual information on the meso level of society in relation to issues of power in the Catholic Church. It directly related to the location of the students, as I previously mentioned, helping me to determine if this played a factor in the student’s atheism.