Navigating the Catholic Church in Belgium. Catholic women on female authority, reforms, and sexual difference.

Abstract

Despite being denied access to ordained positions of power, and limited to occupying lay positions, women numerically outnumber men in the Catholic Church in Belgium. Furthermore, their involvement in the Church mostly takes place in what can be considered gender stereotypical domains, such as education and care providing services. This article explores how Catholic lay women navigate the Belgian Catholic Church, and how they reconcile their religion-based aspirations to be involved in the Church on one hand, and their lack of ordained authority on the other. Based on empirical research (including in-depth interviews, (online) observations and informal conversations), this article foregrounds and analyses the narratives of Catholic lay women who are active in the Church. Drawing on difference feminism scholarship and on Braidotti's postsecular analysis, the article argues that the narratives under consideration should not be read through a secular-liberal conceptualization of gender equality, but rather through a lens that allows the subjectivities and everyday realities of religious women to be made visible and to be acknowledged.

Key words

Catholic women, Belgium, gender and religion, sexual difference, female authority

Introduction

> 'If you are really honest with yourself, and also honest about what you expect regarding your life as a woman, and then take a look at what the Church has to offer you… Well, if you're really honest with yourself, then you leave [the Church].'

This is a quote coming from a conversation I had with Annabelle. Annabelle was at the time of the interview a woman in her mid-thirties who had a packed Catholic life during the preceding years. She was active in the Church for many years, both at a professional and voluntary level. Over the years, however, she felt that she was growing away from the Catholic tradition and the communities she was engaged in. Positioning herself as a critical feminist, Annabelle started struggling with the lack of ordained positions for women. Furthermore, she talked about her frustrations about the institution and the paternalism she encountered while she was active in the Church. Eventually Annabelle left the Church.

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In this quote, Annabelle suggests that one cannot be fully committed as a woman in the Catholic Church[1]. This is, according to her narrative, all the more true when combining positionalities of being both feminist and Catholic. This line of thinking resonates with dominant views in Western post-Christian societies regarding to religion, gender equality, and women's rights. These views are characterised by a dichotomous outlook on religion and secularity, placed in a distinct binary and opposed to one another. Where secularism is considered to be a catalyst for gender and sexual equality, religion is perceived to be a hurdle for women's rights (Knibbe and Bartelink, 2019). During the last decades, an extensive body of scholarship has been developed by a wide range of scholars from different disciplines such as gender studies (Braidotti, 2008), sociology and anthropology of religion (Avishai, 2008; Mahmood, 2005) and feminist theology (Althaus-Reid, 2000; Daly, 1973; Fiorenza, 2011, 2013; King, 1995), all focusing on women in a range of religions. In particular, attempts have been made to argue the necessity of bringing together insights from

these different disciplines (Bowie, 1998; Vuola, 2016). Women in various religious groups and communities have been the subject of analysis, particularly in empirical studies that aimed to highlight the everyday practices and strategies of religious women, thereby revealing the multiple possibilities for women to be fully engaged within religious traditions (Bracke, 2003; Longman, 2008; Trzebiatowska, 2013).

During the last couple of years, a growing number of Catholic women in several European countries are claiming (more) visibility and an expansion of their possibilities and rights within the Church (Giorgi and Palmisano, 2020). Two of the most well-known examples are the Maria 2.0 movement in Germany, which includes *Kirchenstreik* [Church strikes], and the *Comité de la jupe* [Committee of the Skirt] in France. While these phenomena are developing in, among others, its neighbouring countries Germany and France, the Belgian Church and Catholic Belgian women remain relatively silent on this matter[2]. An example of this silence can also be found in the Catholic Women's Council (CWC). The CWC was launched in Stuttgart (Germany) in 2019 and rapidly became an international network bringing together several initiatives, groups, and events from all over the world, all aimed at promoting women's rights and equality within the Catholic Church (Giorgi and Palmisano, 2020). However, it appears that there is no link to be found to the Belgian context. Exploring this silence in Belgium and its causes falls outside the scope of this article.

Rather, this article aims to foreground Catholic women's self-positionings within the Belgian Catholic Church by exploring the narratives of Church-active Catholic women. As Giorgi and Palmisano (2020: 2) posit: '[…] women play a relevant role in Catholicism: yet, they have a limited role in the Catholic Church', this article builds further on this tension, and intends to explore how Catholic women in Belgium perceive this. Do they, to a certain extent, agree with this? What are their attitudes towards (female) authority? These are questions I aim to address in the analysis that follows. While scholars already pointed out religiously inspired feminisms and their (dis)connection from secular feminisms (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska, 2013), this article does not intend to search for traces of feminist thought as such among my respondents. Rather, I want to explore the diverse range of opinions among Catholic women, and how they make sense of

issues such as authority, leadership, and female engagement in the Church. Furthermore, I aim to show how these women navigate through an institution in which they are denied ordained positions of power. I seek to move beyond the question of whether women should be eligible to become priests, and instead turn to what the Catholic women I spoke with have to say about women's positionings and roles within the Church.

This article will be structured as follows. Firstly, I elucidate on the theoretical framework informed by Braidotti's postsecular turn, and the cultural and societal context in which this study takes place, the methodology used in this paper and the research project from which the data emerge. Secondly, I present the discourses of the Catholic women in my study. In so doing, I foreground how these women envision another Church, and how they think and speak about female authority and reforms. Thirdly, I further explore how notions of sexual difference and gender complementarity underpin the narratives of my interlocutors and how we, as feminist scholars, should make sense of these sort of discourses. This will be followed by a conclusion.

Taking the postsecular turn seriously

The postsecular turn within feminist theory draws attention to the importance of taking seriously the subjectivities of religious women, and how they navigate both religious and non-religious spaces and contexts. It should be recalled that (second wave) feminists often criticized the Vatican and the Catholic Church, as they were deemed to be sexist and harmful towards women. These anti-Church statements found resonance in the academy, where religion was seen as suspicious, leading to a marginal position within the burgeoning women's and later gender studies (Longman, 2003). Anti-clericalism undergirds much of the European left and accompanying emancipatory movements, Braidotti (2008: 4) argues, and '[a]nti-clericalism and the critique of the Christian Church, especially the dogmatic and patriarchal attitude of the Catholic Church, is an integral element of feminist secularism in Continental Europe'. Accordingly, Braidotti (2008: 2) writes, the postsecular turn 'challenges European feminism because it makes manifest the notion that

agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety'.

As such, the postsecular turn makes room for taking the narratives and practices of religious women into account. In her work, Braidotti extensively draws upon the work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray's work on sexual difference sits at times uneasily with contemporary conceptualizations of gender equality, which has led several scholars to label Irigaray's work as gender essentialist and to push it aside (Joy, 2006). Luce Irigaray's writings have been profoundly shaped by a specific strand of – albeit a contested term - French feminism and its *écriture feminine*. This feminist tradition, 'the feminism of sexual difference' (Joy, O'Grady and Poxon, 2002: 4), is often placed in opposition to Anglo-American feminist scholarship, and relates to the so-called sameness versus difference debate (Gambaudo, 2007). Throughout her work, Irigaray fiercely criticizes Western, mostly male, philosophers, accusing them (and the scholarly disciplines they represent) of pushing forward the masculine as the invisible normative standard (Irigaray, 1985; Joy, 2006). Irigaray considers men and women as 'irreducible others', which results in 'irreducible differences' between both sexes (Mulder, 2010). Irigaray (1993: 12-13) defines it as follows:

> Thus man and woman, woman and man are always meeting as though for the first time because they cannot be substituted one for the other. I will never be in a man's place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other – they are irreducible one to the other. […] Who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually.

According to Irigaray, we have to find a way out of male universality, and open up possibilities for the feminine (Mulder, 2010).

Catholic women in a post-Christian society

This study is situated in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part and community of Belgium. While Catholicism was once part and parcel of Flemish society, Flanders strongly secularized on an individual and sociocultural level during the past decades and the influence of the Catholic Church on everyday life sharply decreased (Dobbelaere, 2002). Nowadays mainly a form of sociocultural Christianity[3] can be observed within Flemish society (Dobbelaere, 2010). This was wittily captured by one of my interlocutors, Margot, by referring to 'Christmas tree Christians'. This entails persons who would describe themselves as formally Christian (and are often baptized) and celebrate the most important Christian feasts like Easter and Christmas, but they are neither practising Catholic nor church-goers (Billiet, 2017). Despite these processes of secularisation and decreasing numbers of church-going and practising Catholics, there are nevertheless (young) women who are engaged in the Catholic Church.

Moreover, women numerically outnumber men in the Belgian Catholic Church. Lay women's involvement in the Church often takes place in what might be considered gender stereotypical domains, such as (pastoral) care services and education. In addition, there are many more women than men living in religious congregations (Bisschoppen van België, 2019, 2020). The numerical preponderance of women in the Belgian Catholic Church fits the premise that women are more religious than men, and are also more involved in religious traditions (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012). This gendered pattern of women's involvement in religion also came to the fore in my study. Most of the women I spoke with are occupied with what can be described as 'feminine tasks', such as providing care for the elderly and children, teaching religious education, and decorating the church for major holidays such as Easter and Christmas. Several scholars already investigated the role of women in performing 'feminine tasks' in religion, pointing out how we can move beyond regarding these tasks as a form of 'women's oppression', and rather consider them as actions of (female) piety (Gemzöe, 2000; Juchtmans, 2017; Longman, 2010; Sered, 1992).

Studying religiosity from a feminist point of view

This article draws on a larger research project that aims to gain a better understanding of Catholic women in the Catholic Church in Belgium, with special attention to the themes of intimate relationships, sexuality, and gender roles. In the framework of this research, I carried out 45 in-depth interviews with 33 self-identified Catholic women, most of them in their twenties or thirties at the time of the interview. Nearly all my interlocutors come from a middle-class background, attended Catholic schools for their primary and secondary education, and had enjoyed higher education (either BA or MA level). They all identified as heterosexual, except for two women: one of those two described herself as a lesbian woman, the other as bisexual. The majority of these women were born and raised in a Catholic family; only a few women converted from being atheist or non-religious to Catholicism as adults. All interlocutors where white. About two thirds of the women were in a relationship they described as sustainable and meaningful, i.e. they were married, living together with a partner, or living apart but still in a serious relationship. About one third of the women were single but expressed the desire to be involved in a relationship. The average profile of the research participants is quite homogeneous: a white heterosexual woman, with a Catholic familial background, who had attended college or university, and lives up to the societal expectation of being in an intimate relationship (and perhaps marrying) and raising a family. This homogeneous picture was not intentional, but rather a representation of what I have encountered during my field research.

All of these women are active in the Belgian Catholic Church, which entails that they conduct work in the Church, either on a paid or voluntary basis. Women who worked professionally for the Church, for example in the family and/or youth ministries, often also carried out volunteer work in the Church. Most of them were active in their local parish, where they undertook several tasks. They were involved in the organisation of the parish, and, as stated above, were occupied with providing care and religious education, decorating the Church, etcetera.

The interviews took place between 2019 and 2021 and were carried out mostly at the homes of my interlocutors or via Zoom, since the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition to these interviews, I also had (informal and formal) conversations with persons working in pastoral services for families and participated in (online) Catholic events. Only the material specifically pertaining to the topic of women in the Church will be the subject of analysis in this article.

While I do not pursue a feminist agenda in this article nor aim to formulate a feminist critique on the attitudes and practices of these women, this analysis is nonetheless informed by feminist theory and shaped by a feminist research epistemology. As stated earlier, I do not intend to trace feminist politics in the narratives of my respondents nor will I solely focus on acts that could count as resistance (Burke, 2012). Yet, as Avishai, Gerber and Randles (2012) suggest in their article on doing feminist ethnography in conservative field sites, I make a distinction between feminism's political and analytical features. While the former set aims to make visible and to challenge injustice and foster social change , the latter 'engenders a core respect for the words, perspectives, and worldviews of people whose social positioning often renders them less audible, less visible, and thus less able to shape the structures influencing their lives' (Avishai, Gerber and Randles, 2012: 2). Furthermore, the data collection and analysis was guided by a feminist theoretical approach, characterized by reflexivity (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991).

Throughout my research I adopted an anthropological approach, which means that I do not claim any statistical representativeness. However, on certain topics there is a common thread to be found among the discourses of the Catholic women I spoke with, which is the case for ideas on gender complementarity and differences between men and women. In the following two sections, I delve into their narratives.

On (female) authority and reforms

None of my interlocutors openly advocated for more women's rights in the Church. They did not organise actions or go on a church strike like women did in Germany. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these women tacitly approved or accepted that women are denied ordained power.

According to most of my interlocutors, the issue of women's rights in the Church concerns not so much providing access to priesthood for women, but rather the lack of positions of leadership and authority and/or official titles and functions. In the following empirical section, I aim to unpack the arguments and perceptions of my interlocutors. It is important to stress here that all of my interlocutors indicated that women played a major role in maintaining the Catholic Church, particularly at the local level of the parish. This is exemplified by the following two quotes by Kristien and Kim:

> It's the women who do it [all the work]. But at the same time, women are not visible. It's the priest who is most visible, but everything that happens [in the parish and by extension the church] is done by women. From cleaning the church, to the flowers, to setting up the chairs for services of worship, making the booklets, everything. Everything is done by women. It is the woman who keeps the Church upright here in the West. But it's the men who call the shots. – Kristien

> Without women, the Catholic Church would already have been collapsed, I think. – Kim

Drawing on this predominance of women in the Catholic Church, some women indicated that it should become possible for women to be ordained as priests. Their arguments were mostly undergirded by traditional notions of gender and an essentialist conceptualisation of womanhood, thereby emphasising the maternal features of the feminine. Barbara referred to baptism and claimed that it would be so much more powerful if a woman could baptize a child instead of a man, precisely because of the maternal instinct of women. Furthermore, women were supposed to be more empathic, and more familiar with family life as they are often mothers themselves, according to some of the women I spoke with. These 'feminine' qualities would render them as good priests, and capable of guiding a local Church community.

Although the majority of my respondents indicated that women should not become priests per se, this essentialist gender discourse was often conveyed to me. Nonetheless, all of the women indicated that, even though men are not the same as women, neither sexually nor emotionally,

men and women are both of equal importance in the Church.. It was often stated by my interlocutors that men and women are different from each other, each with their own qualities and flaws. Current society, they said, is preoccupied with attempting to erase these differences, whereas in the Church, on the contrary, these differences between women and men are more appreciated and praised. What my interlocutors had to say on sexual difference is in line with the official discourses issued by the Vatican on the sexual complementarity of men and women (Case, 2016). Interestingly, these assumed gender differences are claimed by some women as an argument for accepting women in the priesthood, precisely because they are different from men, which implies that they would underline other features and aspects in their priesthood. However, for other research participants, the priesthood is or should be exclusively reserved for men, as they are more dominant than women and, thus, more suitable for a position of leadership.

A specific remark that sometimes was made during the interviews regarding the inclusion of women in policy bodies was for example Bishops' Synods, and more in particular, the Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015. According to some women, it is not logical that only a select group of (old) men participated in Conferences on such important and timely topics, with an impact on all Catholics, including (young) women. This sentiment is also echoed in the essay that Lucetta Scaraffia[4] (2017) wrote, after the Synods on the Family. In this essay, she outlines on her disappointment that women are not heard by the Vatican, and not sufficiently integrated into ecclesiastical boards.

Crafting a more feminine Church

Some of my interlocutors did not find it a problem that only men can be ordained as priest, but this did not mean that they were completely satisfied with current Church hierarchies. Marjorie, who described herself as a Catholic feminist, stated that the priesthood should be opened up to couples, like for instance the vicar and his wife in certain Christian denominations such as Anglicanism and Protestantism. That way, the priest would no longer be a single and unmarried man – she did not find celibacy a good thing - but would 'run' his parish with his wife.

Responsibilities and worries would not only then be shared by the couple, there would also be new opportunities for the parishioners, Marjorie said. As an example, she referred to denominations belonging to Eastern Christianity, where priests can marry, and their wife receives the title of *presbytera*. This is a future that Marjorie envisions for the Catholic Church as well, thus reforming the priesthood altogether, rather than debating whether women should be allowed access. Reflecting on her own experiences, especially with regards to feminine issues such as childbirth and motherhood, Marjorie would be more eager to go to a priestess or *presbytera* for advice and a conversation instead of going to a male priest. The central issue for her is not the fact that women are excluded from ordained positions in the ministry. It is their lack of presence in decision-making bodies that frustrates her, and what should be tackled by the Church authorities.

Marjorie described herself several times as a Catholic feminist. According to her, feminism is inherently related to her faith:

> For me, feminism is the equivalency of men and women. We are completely equivalent. There is not one that is worth more than the other. In fact, we make each other better. When we work together, instead of being two separate fronts, when men and women work together, great things happen. And, I think that, yes, that's part of it for me. Because you also notice in the Bible, man and woman belong together. And not women thirty steps behind the man, no, next to each other. And, that, yes, but also different, I think that's important too. We are not the same, we are different. And that's okay too. We may even celebrate those differences. What a woman can do, what a man can do, that's different, biologically too, but I also think in other ways in a certain way. But, that is, and for me that is also part of feminism. Namely, fully accepting your womanhood and being allowed to be a woman.

This idea of embracing womanhood and femininity was conveyed by other interlocutors as well. Often, this was accompanied with a profound critique on current society, in which 'differences between men and women are supposed to be denied and erased'. This echoes, to a certain extent, the anti-gender ideology that is present among some branches within the Catholic Church (Kuhar

and Paternotte, 2017). It should be noted that while the Catholic women I spoke with often articulated the idea of a distinct feminine essence and a masculine essence in their narratives, they did not express explicit anti-gender statements.

Similar to Marjorie's discourse, Elise envisions the future of the Church in a way that grants possibilities for the development of both a male and female hierarchical structure. For her, the debate on whether women should be granted access to the priesthood is not a relevant one. According to Elise, the main reason why solely men can become priest, is because the priest is the earthly representative of Jesus, who was a man as well. Therefore, priests should be men. Nevertheless, she discerns different modalities for women to acquire positions of power and authority within the Church:

> There should be created something equally, something that equals priesthood but then purely female. A sort of, yes, if needed a completely alternative hierarchy, specifically for women. A sort of yin and yang, that those two are in balance. So, yes, the masculine functions for the men, and the feminine functions for the women. But how that should be filled in, I don't know. I don't think it should necessarily be separated as such, but that there is at least recognition for what women do in the Church. Absolutely more recognition.

In these alternative hierarchical structures Marjorie and Elise are proposing, a prominent and equally important role for both men and women is foreseen. Yet, both Marjorie and Elise also stress the differences between men and women, and the roles they should take up in the Church.

Unlike Marjorie and Elise, not every Catholic woman I interviewed proposed reforms to promote the position of women in the Church. Some women did not demand any reform at all and were perfectly happy with the current position of women in the Church. Tina, for instance, was of the opinion that men had a natural and biological aptitude to be engaged in positions of leadership and authority, whereas women were more effective in the position of following. It should be noted, however, that Tina was the only interlocutor in this study who thought of these matters in this way. The other women were more moderate in their way of thinking, and although they did not

envisage reforms in the same way as Marjorie and Elise, many interlocutors addressed the lack of career opportunities for women in the Church.

Sexual difference and gender complementarity

What clearly underpins the narratives of all my interlocutors is the idea of sexual difference, the assertion that men and women fundamentally differ from one another but are of equal worth. This idea of equal worth and the complementarity between men and women, is not rare within traditional approaches to religion, as it is conveyed in religious traditions such as Islam (Jouili, 2015; van Nieuwkerk, 2014), Christianity (Aune and Guest, 2019), and Judaism (Longman, 2007)[5]. While these empirical studies, and the study carried out by Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016), have made substantial and important contributions to the field of gender and religion, I want to take a slightly different approach to the women's narratives that are the subject of analysis here.

In so doing, I posit that these narratives should be considered as situated in a specific religious-philosophical landscape. Reading these Catholic women's accounts through a secular-liberal interpretation of feminism and gender equality, would render their attitudes and strategies on female authority illegible. These women's conscious self-positioning as sexed women revolving around a female core then raises the question of how we should approach this from a feminist theoretical perspective. The so-called postsecular turn in feminist theory as proposed by Braidotti (2008) might be helpful to flesh out this identity-making project. In earlier work, Rosi Braidotti (1993: 10) suggested that 'the strategy of extreme affirmation of sexed identity [is] a way of reversing the attribution of difference in a hierarchical mode'. Applying this to the discourses of Marjorie and Elise I elucidated above, and by extension to the other respondents in my study, enables us to further analyse how these women envision a more female-friendly Church. By explicitly sexing women and attributing certain qualities to women, these participants advocate for a better inclusion and integration of women within Church hierarchies, precisely on the basis of their sexed womanhood. Hence, sexual difference between men and women is evoked in order to foster gender equity in the Catholic Church.

Moving on from here, we can further explore the potential for alternative readings of these women's accounts. We might be tempted to read these accounts as gender essentialising, reducing both male and female characteristics to stereotypical features. Approaching them through the paradigm of social constructivism, as proposed by feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990), would even more complicate these accounts on sexual difference. However, drawing on the conceptualisation of gender as equity and complementarity, we are able to place the narratives of these women in another perspective. The idea of men and women as complementary to each other was repeatedly noted by my interlocutors. Fundamental differences between men and women were often praised, instead of criticized. Accordingly, these interlocutors stressed the importance of appreciating the feminine more within the Church, precisely because they are different. This re-appreciation and shaping of a feminine identity can be found in Irigaray's work as well. Similar to Irigaray (1993) who envisages an ethics of sexual difference, my Catholic interlocutors also reject the idea that women should adjust themselves to the masculine standard in order achieve positions of authority within the Church (i.e. the priesthood). Instead, they put forward alternative constellations of power, in which the feminine is made explicit and appreciated as having equal value and status as the masculine.

While my interlocutors make a plea for more and/or alternative positions of power and authority – not necessarily ordained - in the Church, they (re)produce gendered notions of femininity at the same time. These Catholic women attempt to make sense of their religious tradition while at the same time being part of a society in which religion plays a smaller and smaller part, as is reflected in other studies on contemporary lived experiences of Catholics (Cornelio, 2016; Dillon, 1999; Nabhan-Warren, 2007). Although the fact that all my interlocutors – except for Marjorie who described herself as a Catholic feminist – rejected the label of feminism altogether, they nevertheless drew upon a sort of difference feminism to argue for a better position for women in the Church. It seems that although my interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis dominant understandings of gender and gender equality in current society, some of these feminist understandings of women's rights and opportunities nonetheless inform their attitudes

on women's rights in the Church. As most of them indicated that they were in favour of more possibilities for women in the Church – not necessarily ordained possibilities, their discourses are shaped by a precisely feminist aspiration to have more women involved in positions of power and authority.

Conclusion

In this article I explored the narratives of Catholic women who are active in the Belgian Catholic Church, and their attitudes to female authority (whether or not in relation to priesthood) and the (alternative) hierarchical power structures they envision. Some of my interlocutors advocated for a better integration of women within the Church, but do not necessarily want to open up the priesthood as it stands now to women. Rather, they wish to create a separate hierarchy for women, in which female attributes are acknowledged and endorsed. Other women, on the other hand, spoke of the desire to have women included in the priesthood, precisely because women are different from men. Here, the maternal character of women was often evoked as a profound reason to allow women to become priests and thus to baptise children.

Throughout the article I showed how notions of sexual difference underpin the accounts of the Catholic women I spoke with, and how the concept of gender complementarity was markedly present among my interlocutors. Instead of focusing on a framework in which secular-liberal notions of gender equality are foregrounded, I drew upon the postsecular turn of Braidotti (2008). This allows us to analyse the discourses I came across in my study, as it helped us to see how the motivations of Catholic Church-active women are also shaped by the context in which they emerge. Following Braidotti, I was also able to show the women's embeddedness in the Catholic tradition and their critique of Western European secular-liberal feminism and its conceptualisation of gender equality. At the same time, however, it became clear that these Catholic women are also informed and influenced – to some degree - by (secular) feminist conceptualisations of equality and the equal participation of women and men. By drawing upon

the postsecular turn, I was able to unpack a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and attitudes of these Catholic women.

Notes

1. I use Catholicism/Catholic instead of Roman Catholicism/Roman Catholic for reasons of readability.
2. In April 2021 an opinion piece in the Flemish quality newspaper *De Standaard* was published, which was written by KU Leuven female theologians Anne Vandenhoeck and Annemie Dillen (2021). In this piece, they pointed to the exclusion of women to ordained positions and called for a better integration of women in the Catholic structures and institutions. The piece was signed by around 30 women, all active in the Belgian Catholic Church.
3. The Flemish/Belgian religious-philosophical landscape can be captured as a form of socio-cultural Christianity. Many citizens are baptized and thus formally Catholic but would not describe themselves as Catholic or Christian. Additionally, several *rites de passage* – albeit with declining numbers of participants – are still celebrated in Church, for instance baptisms, marriages, and funerals. National holidays are grafted on Catholic holy days, such as Easter and Christmas, but also the Feast of the Ascension, Pentecost, and the Assumption of Mary. Demerath (2000) describes forms of socio-cultural Christianity as cultural religion, or 'a style of religion that resides ''in the culture'' without compelling active belief or participation' (Demerath, 2000: 136). Furthermore, the material and architectural culture of Flemish society bears clear traces of a once powerful and rich Catholic religious culture. Villages and cities are centred around churches, crosses and chapels can be found along the roads, and several municipalities are named after saints. For many people, these examples of ambient religion remain often implicit and invisible (Kaell, 2016), but nevertheless point out to both a recognisable history and the enduring presence of Catholicism.

4. Lucetta Scaraffia was member of the editorial board of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official journal of the Vatican. Furthermore, she is the founder of *Donne Chiesa Mondo* [Women, Church, World], a women's magazine that is part of *L'Osservatore Romano*.
5. Perhaps, surprisingly, these notions of gender difference and complementarity are noticeable as well in contemporary spirituality movements, despite their profound critique of institutional and patriarchal religions (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016).

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