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‘Feminisation’ thesis: a survey of international historiography and a probing of Belgian grounds.*

Introduction

The importance of ‘sex’ or ‘gender’ for the power, impact or even the very existence of Christianity has evolved within the historical research of the last decades from a barely examined factor to an essential basis for the construction of different theories. The main representative for this attention is the *master narrative* of ‘the feminisation of Christianity’.

It embodies a shift in vision within historical research. The image of the 19th Century evolved from a secular era to a period characterised by a flourishing religious life, with women as its main cornerstones. However, the secularisation thesis was not always completely relegated to the background and ‘the feminisation of Christianity’ was perceived as an aspect of the ‘secularisation’, as an addition to this thesis. The argument goes that, even though men were seduced by the ‘secularisation’, Christian culture by no means disappeared completely as women ensured its continued existence and development.¹ Opinions differ as to whether this is a positive or negative development. One view links it to Christianity’s decline and diminished influence in the field of public matters. This opinion shares the complaints of 19th Century contemporaries. Susan Juster, however, describes it as ‘more a convenient fiction than historical reality’.² Other interpretations are a lot more positive and link the 19th Century renaissance of Christianity (ultramontanisme, pietism) to this ‘feminisation’. According to Relinde Meiwes, for instance, the ‘Vitalisierung des Religiösen’ cannot be researched correctly if one does not take the aspect of gender into account.³

Ensuring the continued existence of the Christian culture is quite a formidable burden. More and more critical voices refuse the idea that this is carried by only one

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¹ H. MC LEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit-männlicher Unglaube? Religion und Kirchen im bürgerlichen 19. Jahrhundert*, in *Bürgerinnen und Bürger. Geschlechtsverhältnisse im 19. Jahrhundert*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988, p.141; H. MC LEOD, *New Perspectives on the religious history of Western and Northern Europe 1815-1960*, in *Kyrkhistorisk Arsskrift*, 1.100 (2000), p.137-138; H. MC LEOD, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, in *Journal of Modern European History*, 3 (2005), p.209; M.RUFF, *The Postmodern Challenge to the Secularization Thesis*, in *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religion- und Kulturgeschichte*, 99 (2005), p.398; C. FORD, *Divided Houses. Religion and Gender in Modern France*, Ithaca-London, 2005, p.3.

² J. DE VRIES, *Rediscovering Christianity after the Postmodern turn*, in *Feminist Studies*, 31 (2005), p.152; H. STOUT, C. BREKUS, *Declension, Gender, and the ‘New Religious History’*, New Jersey, 1991, p.31; S. JUSTER, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language and Sexuality in American Protestantism*, in *New Directions in American Religious History*, New York-Oxford, 1997, p.334.

³ R. MEIWES, *‘Arbeiterinnen des Herrn’. Katholische Frauenkongregationen im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt-New York, 2000, p.19.

gender. Moreover, ‘container’-concepts such as ‘secularisation’ and ‘feminisation’ are criticised more frequently. Debates seem to indicate the need for a plain definition of feminisation within different national contexts and denominations. This paper will spotlight the Belgian case. Our starting position is Belgium’s interesting location in between France on the one hand, where Christianity’s feminisation is accepted as a general rule, and Germany on the other hand, where the theory has met with a great deal of resistance. Using a number of variations, basic elements and probable causes from other studies into ‘feminisation’, we will attempt to verify whether these theories also hold true for Catholicism in Belgium. Is ‘feminisation’ a factor here as well or was the male involvement so prominently present that the existence of ‘feminisation’ or certain of its aspects in Belgium can be questioned altogether? Taking the novelty of this thesis with regards to Belgium into account, no definitive conclusion can be drawn. Therefore, suggestions are offered as to the kind of research that could fill the gaps in the analysis of the Belgian case.

‘Feminisation’: a thesis and its variations

As basic elements of identity, gender and religion have always been dynamic constructs, subject to change. The relationship between both elements is therefore in constant flux. The religious precepts, its values, standards, practice and convictions helped mould the male and female identities.⁴ Vice versa, however, it has also been remarked that religion can no longer be described accurately without the critical use of the category of gender.

In 1998, Geert Hofstede and his co-authors published *Masculinity and Femininity. The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures*. Their goal was to challenge the current mode of Western thought using gender theory and performing comparative international research. In their discussion of religion they state that ‘It appears that for the study of secularisation, Mas/Fem [the dimension of masculinity versus femininity] is the most important single country characteristic. It is especially related to the subjective side of religiosity, and somewhat less to institutionalised religious practices.’⁵ This article will also avoid a purely institutional point of view and it is therefore deemed necessary to start off with the best possible definition of the concept of ‘feminisation of Christianity’. This heading comprises four notions, each with differences in content as a result of confessional and geographic variations.

Defining ‘feminisation’: ‘feminisation’ of religious personnel

One way to define ‘feminisation’ refers to the quantitative supremacy of women in religious places. Higher numbers of women are found on the religious field, both with the professional clergy and with laymen. When determining the ‘feminisation’ of religious personnel, the marked success of female congregations and communities and the expansion of their activities into the fields of hospitals, youth houses and

⁴ O.BLASCHKE, *Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein Zweites Konfessionelles Zeitalter?*, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 26 (2000), p.39, p.47; U. KING, *Religion and Gender: embedded Patterns, Interwoven Frameworks*, in *A Companion to Gender History*, Malden-Oxford, 2004, p.83, p.72; A.VAN HEIJST, M. DERKS, *Godsvrucht en gender: naar een geschiedschrijving in meervoud*, in *Terra incognita. Historisch onderzoek naar katholicisme en vrouwelijkheid*, Kampen, 1994, p.38.

⁵ J. VERWEIJ, The Importance of Femininity in Explaining Cross-National Differences in Secularization, in *Masculinity and Femininity. The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures*, 1998, Thousand Oaks, p.187.

maternities is an important factor.⁶ Bernhard Schneider concludes that ‘Die kirchliche Caritas trug ein weibliches Gesicht’ while Hugh McLeod christens the 19th Century as ‘the century of the nun’.⁷ Norbert Busch has a very different interpretation for the ‘clergy’s feminisation’, using the title to refer to the ‘feminine characteristics’ displayed by the German Catholic 19th Century clergy in its daily routines. The beard disappeared, the habit became the regular dress and inns, typical gathering places for men, were from then on no longer frequented by the clergy.⁸

From the 19th Century onwards, female congregations in Belgium also underwent a significant development. During the *Ancien Régime*, the number of religious men was double the women. However, a disparate growth of male and female congregations turned these numbers completely on their heads. As a result, by the year 1900, Belgium counted four times more female than male clergymen.⁹ This is not an absolute rise, however, as between 1884-1885 and 1902-1903 there are a great deal of men following their religious calling. This increase can be mainly attributed to the missionary congregations and secular ecclesiastics.¹⁰ However, the general growth of the religious field in Belgium is largely achieved by female religious. Their numbers rose right up to the middle of the 20th Century, as they, more than their male counterparts, had active roles in education and health care. This had a great influence on the recruitment success-rate and the subsequent growth. Social acceptance of congregations that made themselves useful was bigger than that of contemplative congregations. Ever since the Revolutionary period, congregations lacking an educational or charitable function suffered a loss in prestige.¹¹ Further, the generalisation of primary education in Belgium in the 19th Century ensured continued activities. Research shows a tremendous number of female religious people active in primary education. The magnitude of this phenomenon contributed to the feminisation of the teaching profession.¹²

In the case of Belgium, a quantitative feminisation of religious personnel is a certain fact. As early as 1976, André Tihon, following Claude Langlois’ French research, referred to this disparate growth of male and female clergymen as ‘une féminisation.’ However, Tihon did note the difficulty in finding similarities between the growth of female congregations and the general vitality of 19th Century religious life.¹³ In accordance with the feminisation thesis, it is our opinion that fluctuations in

⁶ R. MEIWES, ‘Arbeiterinnen’ [see n.3], p.263; L. ABRAMS, *The making of modern woman: Europe: 1789-1918*, London-New York, 2002, p.35; H. MC LEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.135.

⁷ B. SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung der Religion im 19. Jahrhundert. Perspektiven einer These im Kontext des deutschen Katholizismus*, in *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift*, 111 (2002), p.126, p.129; H. MC LEOD, *New Perspectives* [see n.1], p.137, p.141;

⁸ N. BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung der Frömmigkeit*, in *Wunderbare Erscheinungen. Frauen und katholische Frömmigkeit im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Paderborn-München, 1995, p.214.

⁹ A.TIHON, *Les religieuses en Belgique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle. Approche statistique*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 7 (1976), p.122-123.

¹⁰ J.ART, *De evolutie van het aantal mannelijke roepingen in België tussen 1830 en 1975. Basisgegevens en richtingen voor verder onderzoek*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 3 (1979), p.296-300.

¹¹ E. DE MAESSCHALK, *De gevolgen van de revolutie voor de Kerk. 1780-1830*, in *Geloven in de Lage Landen. Scharniermomenten in de geschiedenis van het Christendom*, Leuven, 2004, p.151.

¹² M. DEPAEPE, H.LAUWERS, F.SIMON, *De feminisering van het leerkrachtenkorps in België in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 82, 2004, p.980-981.

¹³ A.TIHON, *Les religieuses* [see n.9], p.122-123; C. LANGLOIS, *Le catholicisme au féminin*, in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 57.1(1984), p.29-30.

the proportions of men and women in Belgium is in fact the expression of a general development.

Defining 'feminisation': 'feminisation' of the faithful

Aside from the 'feminisation' of professional religious, various historians have also indicated a 'feminisation' of the faithful. This refers to an increased presence of women laymen dealing with Church affairs and active in the broader aspects of religious life. Women would increasingly take on Church volunteer work for both the Protestant and the Catholic faiths. Protestant women would work in missions and Sunday schools and lay Catholic women would become more involved in charitable matters. Gisela Bock has the following description: 'within the context of 'social labours of love', religion was feminized in many countries. There was no denomination in which women did not mobilize in this sense, whether within the scope of conventional Churches, the new revivalist movements or the non-conformists and Dissenters.'¹⁴ Furthermore, pilgrimages were attended predominantly by Catholic women, they joined confraternities and made good on their obligations to confess their sins.¹⁵

Sarah Curtis makes the remark that far more attention is paid to the expansion of female orders than to the feminisation of the faithful.¹⁶ In part, this is a result of the critical reservations regarding certain sources such as the decanal visitation reports and the annual Easter reports, as these documents recorded attendance of Mass on Sunday, confession and communion and was then turned into a gauge for religiosity in historical research. When using these sources as the basis for analysis, the ecclesiastical definition of religion is copied and thus often limited 'to the study of behaviour and keeping it as such, without further thought as to the behaviour's significance for different groups in society and individual players.'¹⁷ As a result, different Belgian studies concerning church attendance, confession and communion do remark the inequalities between men and women, without further considering an explanation using gender.

These visitation reports show that, from the 19th Century onwards, the Church does consider failure to attend mass on Sunday as a problem. Studies of both the dioceses Ghent and Bruges have shown that the truants to be predominantly male. These sources also suggest female Mass attendance on Sunday and benediction, was high.¹⁸ The annual confession and communion, both common church practices in the 19th Century, were observed mainly by women.¹⁹ At the start of the 20th Century, Church authorities determined that taking communion and confessing one's sins were insufficient if only practiced a few times per year, such as only on Church holidays.

¹⁴ G. BOCK, *Women in European History*, Oxford-Massachusetts, 2002, p.114.

¹⁵ B. SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.132, B. WELTER, *The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860*, in *Clio's Consciousness raised*, New York, 1974, p.139.

¹⁶ S.CURTIS, *Charitable Ladies: Gender, Class and Religion in Mid Nineteenth-Century Paris*, in *Past and Present*, 177 (2002), p.122.

¹⁷ J.ART, *Nieuwe bronnen of andere vragen? Enkele beschouwingen bij het universitaire onderzoek naar de Belgische contemporaine religieuze geschiedenis*, in *Godsdienst, Mentaliteit en Dagelijks Leven. Religieuze Geschiedenis in België sinds 1970*, Brussel, 1988, p.175.

¹⁸ W.ROMBAUTS, *De zondagsviering*, in *Het bisdom Brugge (1559-1984). Bisschoppen, priesters, gelovigen*, Brugge, 1985, p.450; M.CLOET, *Zondagsviering en sacramenteel leven*, in *Het bisdom Gent (1559-1991). Vier eeuwen geschiedenis*, Gent, 1992, p.177, p.190.

¹⁹ H. VERBEKE, *De biecht als sociale controle: element van grensbehoud*, in *Godsdienst, Mentaliteit en Dagelijks Leven. Religieuze Geschiedenis in België sinds 1970*, Brussel, 1988, p.241.

Rome started to advise frequent, even daily, communion in combination with confession. This new practice was only upheld by women, which turned it into a serious hurdle for Belgian clergymen. Fraternities reacted by urging their male members to collectively go to communion and confession at least once a month. Societies such as the Leagues of the Sacred Heart used these actions to stress that religion was not exclusively reserved to women and children.²⁰ Precise numbers regarding the sex of the Easter truants are not available. An estimate for the diocese of Bruges during the period 1840-1911, compiled from indirect references such as names and professions, shows convincing evidence that '[...] the proportion of women to men lies around +/- 1/7 and 1/3 [...]'²¹. This estimate also shows that the portion of women decreases when the number of truants increases. Mass, confession and communion present the same gender difference. When further taking into account that the number of men and women in the general population was largely the same, this discrepancy gains in significance.²²

In order to measure modern religiosity, historical analysis needs to take pilgrimage and pious fraternities into account as well. Both closely related phenomena had existed long prior yet became popular to an unprecedented degree around the middle of the 19th Century. The Church recognised these expressions of popular religious culture as means to bind the large masses to herself, and therefore sought to institutionalise them as much as possible. One should interpret within this context, both Rome's official recognition of the intense devotion of the Virgin Mary through Her appearance in, among others *La Salette* and *Lourdes*, and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.²³ The Marian pilgrimages in Belgium, such as in Halle, Scherpenheuvel, Dadizele and Oostakker were a huge success as well. Although the popularity of the Marian devotion in itself has been considered a sign of feminisation of Catholicism, there are also signs for a quantitative feminisation. Research into the available numbers for the entire 19th Century and the first couple of decades of the 20th Century also once again prove that the female pilgrims were in the majority. The numbers for Halle, Scherpenheuvel and Dadizele show that each year, at least twice more women than men undertook a pilgrimage.²⁴

This marked preference for the worship of saints and the people's worship of the Virgin Mary can also be tracked to several fraternities devoted to The Mother Mary. First created in the 17th Century, these *confréries*, led by parish priests or friars, turned into remarkably efficient organisations for the faithful who did not wish to be limited to the strict duties of religious practice. Aside from increasing their own piety, the members also helped beautifying ceremonies and performed charity. In those fraternities whose membership lists were reconstructed, the majority of members were at all time women. Nevertheless, the men played the most crucial role in the fraternity in the 18th Century. However, from the 19th Century onwards, women were no longer relegated to the shadows and took on different activities in the fraternities.²⁵

²⁰ H. VERBEKE, *De biecht* [see n.19], p.242-243.

²¹ W. ROMBAUTS, *Het Paasverzuim in het bisdom Brugge: 1840-1911*, Leuven, 1971, p.99. [our translation]

²² W. ROMBAUTS, *Het Paasverzuim* [see n.21], p.97-101.

²³ N.LEHOUCQ, *De mariale bedevaarten in de 19^{de} eeuw. Dadizele-Oostakker-Scherpenheuvel. Funktionale en tijdsgebonden aspecten*, in *Oostvlaamse Zanten*, 64 (1989), p.260-264

²⁴ N.LEHOUCQ, *Volksdevotie en bedevaartspraktijk in Vlaanderen. Analytisch en vergelijkend onderzoek van de Mariaverering, 1830-1925* (thèse inédit), Gent, 1980, p.I, 10-11, 23-24, 26, 35.

²⁵ M.THERRY, *De Broederschap van het Alderheylighste Sacrament des Autaers te Roeselare (1728-1792). Baroke vroomheid en dechristianisatie?*, in *Rollariensia*, 13 (1981), p.93-95; M.THERRY,

It is hard to determine a quantitative gender difference for Belgium concerning volunteer work undertaken with the blessings of the Catholic Church. However, a comparison of research regarding Catholic volunteer work of both men and women does reveal a number of differences in quality. Catholic men dabbled primarily in the establishment of patronages. Further, in the name of their religion, they took on roles in politics and worked towards controlled and limited emancipation. They fought for a preferential position for the Church within society and a lasting cooperation between Church and State.²⁶ As freedom of speech, religion and association were a basic part of the Belgian constitution, this level of involvement was further amplified in Belgium. As a result, Catholics could initiate societal concerns. It can therefore be concluded that religion made a strong contribution to the creation of a public identity.²⁷ These affirmations imply that men compensated for their waning Church involvement with a different kind of engagement. Signs of Apostasy cannot be defined exclusively as absenteeism. It is especially important that these men acted independently from the official Church edicts. Though their political activities were inspired by Catholicism, the Church authorities did not order them to act in this way.²⁸ While Catholic men attempted to channel social tension through politics, Catholic women tried to alleviate society's needs with grounded philanthropic and charitable works. House visits, child day care and confirmation classes were regarded as an extension of their domestic tasks. Within the context of Catholic volunteer work, there was a marked difference between the content of women's and men's activities. In contrast to the Catholic men, Catholic women did cooperate with religious orders on numerous occasions and were often led by a parish priest.²⁹ It could be concluded that the religious gender difference came about during a man-woman opposition stemming from the refusal or acceptance of outside authority in the modern age.

Defining 'feminisation': changes in the nature of religion

A third meaning of the concept of 'feminisation', apart from the quantitative dominance, concerns the nature of religion, as it pays attention to a 'softer' religious content and a 'sentimentalisation' of the 19th Century forms of devotion. This interpretation characterises 19th Century language and theology by their 'feminine' sensibilities, in which the image of the vengeful, stern God was replaced by a God of love. This shift in content is at times described as 'God turns female' or 'God changes sex'.³⁰ In the case of Catholicism, this refers to the emotional and sentimental aspects found in 19th Century ultramontanism. The Protestant faith is also said to experience a similar shift from Calvinism to an anti-intellectual sentimentalism. Changes to the

Volksdevoties in de 18^{de} eeuw, in *Het bisdom Brugge (1559-1984). Bisschoppen, priesters, gelovigen*, Bruges, 1985, p.236-238.

²⁶ J.DE MAEYER, *Les hommes d'oeuvres en Belgique (1875-1919/1921): utopistes néomédiévaux ou hommes politiques*, in *Rêves de Chrétienté. Réalités du monde. Imaginaire Catholique*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001, p.191-192.

²⁷ P.VAN DER VEER, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton, 2001, p.28-29, p.83.

²⁸ V.VIAENE, *Belgium and the Holy See from Gregory XVI to Pius IX (1831-1859). Catholic Revival, Society and Politics in 19th-Century Europe*, Leuven, 2001, p.167, p.203.

²⁹ J.DE MAEYER, 'Les dames d'oeuvres'. 19^{de} eeuwse vrouwen van stand en hun zoektocht naar maatschappelijk engagement, in *Zakenvrouwen Vrouwenzaken. Facetten van vrouwelijk zelfstandig ondernemerschap in Vlaanderen, 1800-2000*, Gent, 2001, p.119.

³⁰ Citation of Michelet in De Giorgio. M.DE GIORGIO, *La Bonne Catholique*, in *Histoire des Femmes en Occident*, 5 vol., Paris, 1991, t.4, p.172, p.186.

image of Jesus fit into this context as well. It is often pointed out that his long hair, passive stance and sentimental appearance suspiciously resemble female characteristics, using such concepts as 'androgynisation' to describe his image change. Within the boundaries of Catholicism, the prominent place appointed to Mary in the 19th Century is often pointed at when discussing the content of 'feminisation'. Her devotion took on such proportions that the term 'Century of Mary' is at times used. The increase in popularity of either old or recent female saints and the dominance of female angels, allegories and saints in religious painting has also been mentioned within the context of this feminisation of content.³¹

For Belgium, the content and icons of popular Mary and Christ devotions is the main source for traces of this theological feminisation. In the 19th Century, Catholicism issued the dogma of Immaculate Conception in 1854, turning Mary into 'a strong Virgin, fully immune to the original sin and capable of triumph over atrocious blasphemy'.³² Aside from this, she was also portrayed as very pious. Mary was the perfect mother and wife, an example to all religious women.³³ Apparently, Mary's hyper-feminisation latched onto certain sensibilities already present in Belgian society. Through the cult of the Sacred Heart, Jesus' and Mary's devotion were inextricably linked. Images of the Sacred Heart often portrayed Christ's bleeding heart along with Mary's pierced heart. This devotion was a symbol for the human will for penance and more specifically for Jesus' vulnerability and willingness for sacrifice so many women could identify with. After WWI, the cult of the Sacred Heart in Belgium gained a patriotic aspect: it was incorporated into large-scale Catholic actions and the aspect of willingness for sacrifice was relegated to the background: 'people went from a fixation with the suffering Christ to a new, socially aware spirituality, which took new social realities into account'.³⁴

The importance of these devotions and their representation for historical research should not be underestimated. Among other things, the popularity demonstrates how big a role devotions played in 19th Century everyday religious life and how they can be used as gauges for the content linked to that religious life. In the case of Belgium, this content was mainly comprised of sentiment, focusing primarily on femininity.³⁵

Representations of pathos can be found in 19th Century devotional images depicting the Holy Family and the baby Jesus, which were popular in Belgium. Family life is the central idea in the images of the Holy Family. The labouring father

³¹ C.FORD, Religion and Popular Culture in Modern Europe, in *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), p.167-168; C. FORD, *Divided Houses* [see n.1], p.96; N. BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.8], p.204; R.HARRIS, *Les miraculeuses de Lourdes*, in *Les femmes in les sciences de l'homme (XIXe-XXe siècles). Inspiratrices, collaboratrices ou créatrices?*, Paris, 2005, p.287; B. WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.139-142; S. JUSTER, *The Spirit* [see n.2], p.345-346; R. BURTON, *Holy Tears, Holy Blood. Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840-1970*, Ithaca-London, 2004, p.xxiii-xxiv; C.LANGLOIS, *Féminisation du Catholicisme*, in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, 4 vol., 1991, t.3, p.298; A.DOUGLAS, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York, 1977, p.6, p.13; R. MAGRAW, *France, 1800-1914. A Social History*, London-New York, 2005, p.171; L.GEVERS, A.VUURSTAEK, *Mariadevotie, hefboom van een uitgeversbedrijf (1877-1914/1973)*, in *Averbode, een uitgever apart 1877-2002*, Averbode, 2002, p.71, p.73.

³² A. DELFOSSE, *De Maagd Maria, een polymorfe figuur van het katholicisme*, in *Devotie en godsdienstbeoefening in de verzameling van de Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, Brussel, 2005, p.78.

³³ A. DELFOSSE, *De Maagd Maria* [see n.32], p.78. [our translation]

³⁴ J.MARX, *De cultus van het Heilig Hart: een materialistische en politieke devotie*, in *Devotie en godsdienstbeoefening in de verzameling van de Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, Brussel, 2005, p.111. [our translation]

³⁵ P.MORY, *Imagerie religieuse, église et piété populaire*, in *Foi, gestes et institutions religieuses aux 19^e et 20^e siècles*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1991, p.38.

is aided by his son while the mother watches over them both. The obedient Jesus in particular serves as a model to children. The images of Jesus as a child serve a similar purpose. They are evidently aimed towards children, yet it is remarkable how the images seem to try to appeal primarily to girls. Scenes in which Jesus as a child urges girls to be loving, obedient and to carry their own cross are as common as scenes propagating devotional acts such as praying, charity and Easter duties. Such images grew alongside the girls, thus presenting examples of images in which older girls are subtly tempted, as it were, by an adult Christ into a life dedicated solely to Him.³⁶

These softening theologies gained sentimental characteristics mainly through their iconographic representation. Devotional images were exemplary in nature and, analogous to other devotional objects, served the purpose of creating a familiar rapport between the spectator and the person in the image.³⁷ This put an end to the previous inaccessibility of saints and God. The abundance of tender and heart-felt details associated the devotional images with sentimentality.³⁸ As the bulk of these came from France, one could call it an imported discourse. As such, the devotions' external characteristics specific to France are transplanted onto Belgium.³⁹

Defining 'feminisation': discursive 'feminisation'

Fourthly, 'feminisation' denotes the so-called 'discursive feminisation of Christianity'.⁴⁰ This refers to the quasi identification of femininity and piety in 19th Century discourse. Piety became an intrinsically female trait, which would be presented in women's clothing and duties. The constant identification of women with piety led to a re-evaluation within society, a kind of 'sacralisation' of 'the woman'.⁴¹ This resulted in a substantial 'image change' in both the Protestant and the Catholic denominations. This positive appreciation of the woman in 19th Century religious discourse stood in stark contrast to the overall negative attitude prevalent in previous centuries. Women transformed from their previous roles as seductresses of men and active agents of evil into models of piety and virtue. In essence, they crossed over from 'seduction' to 'conversion'. Conversely, while during Medieval times and the early modern age, masculinity had been at the core of depictions of piety, it transformed into a potential threat to pious 'innocent' and 'passionless' women, now the moral heart of the family, who carried responsibility and moral virtues for their

³⁶ C.ROSENBAUM-DONDAINE, *L'image de piété en France. 1814-1914*, Paris, 1984, p.6, p.102-103, p.110-111.

³⁷ P.NISSEN, 'Zoals in het huisje van Nazareth...' *Over devotie en rituelen in de kring van het gezin en de religieuze aankleding van het woonhuis*, in *Trajecta*, 4 (1995), p.147-148.

³⁸ J.PIROTTE, *Objets, kitsch et fois populaires*, in *Godsdienst, mentaliteit en dagelijks leven. Religieuze geschiedenis in België sinds 1970*, Brussel, 1988, p.162.

³⁹ J.PIROTTE, *Devotieprentjes, 'media' van een religieuze volkscultuur*, in *Devotie en godsdienstbeoefening in de verzameling van de Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, Brussel, 2005, p.172-175; P.MORY, *Imagerie religieuse* [see n.35], p.32.

⁴⁰ Y.WERNER, *Christliche Männlichkeit- ein Paradox der Moderne. Männer und Religion im nordeuropäischen Kontext 1840-1940*, conference paper, AIM-Gender Tagung 2004, 2004, p.1.

⁴¹ 'As well as feminising piety, evangelicism pietised femininity. Femininity became sacred and nothing but sacred'. C. BROWN, *The death of Christian Britain. Understanding secularisation 1800-2000*, London, 2001, p.58-60, p.62, p.68, p.79-88; B. SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.133, p.126; C.FORD, *Religion* [see n.31], p.167, p.169; I. GÖTZ VON OLENHUSEN, *Die Feminisierung von Religion und Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Forschungsstand und Forschungsperspektiven (Einleitung)*, in *Frauen unter dem Patriarchat der Kirchen. Katholikinnen und Protestantinnen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart-Berlin, 1995, p.11-12; G. CHOLVY, Y. HILAIRE, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, Toulouse, 1985, p.177.

offspring.⁴² However, it remains true that the 20th Century still considered female sexuality as dangerous and religious studies permanently considered women to carry the potential to lead men to stray from their righteous path, i.e. through their immoral dress. Pat Starkey illustrates this polemic with a quote from Ireland: 'If the young women of Ireland were pure and modest, there need never be any fear for the faith of Ireland'.⁴³ However, this close identification of femininity and religiosity could also become negatively evaluated and develop into a depreciation of religion and depiction of the faithful as 'effeminized'.⁴⁴

In Belgium, the Catholic Church involved the women in its secular dialogue. Belgian bishops saw the lack of Christian education and spirituality as a part of the increased irreligiosity. As a result, they envisioned an important role for the family to play in restoring and expanding the influence of Christian values in society. As the bishops believed in the superior religiousness of women, they focused their strategy primarily on the role of the mother. The ideal mother offered motherly love, was chaste and subservient.⁴⁵ The Catholic Church recognised that mainly women passed on religious customs, values and faith. In his article, *The Church and the family in Belgium, 1850-1914* Paul Servais shows the Episcopal vision did indeed contribute to the 'sacralisation' of women, while at the same time it was a source of self-confidence for women: 'The woman's domain is at the heart of the family, where she distinguishes herself by discretion, self-sacrifice and submission. Modesty and decency are terms typifying her. Yet this does not seem to prevent her from exercising a certain ascendancy over her husband nor, a fortiori, from playing a major educational role, especially in religion'.⁴⁶

This discursive 'feminisation' is found in 19th and 20th Century Belgian paintings. Belgian realist and impressionist artists inspired by Christianity generally avoided Old and New Testament scenes in favour of expressions of popular piety. On the one hand, this popular piety is situated within a domestic atmosphere, as is the case in the social-realist works of Charles de Groux (1825-1870). On the other hand, influenced by impressionism, events taking place outside of the home, such as pilgrimages and processions, are a recurrent subject as well. The remarkable thing about these pictures is that in comparison to men women and children are given an important, if not exclusive, role. The main participants in pilgrimages and processions as painted by Isidoor Verheyden (1846-1905), Edmond van Offel (1871-1959), Emile Claus (1849-1924), Emile Hoeterickx (1853-1923), Leon Frédéric (1856-1940), Jos Speybrouck (1891-1956), Karel Van Belle (1884-1959) and Léon Navez (1900-1967) are women and children. Often, men will be completely absent.⁴⁷ It may appear problematic to use these paintings as source material. In order to come to the conclusion that these

⁴² S.JUSTER, *The Spirit* [see n.2], p.345; M.WESTERKAMP, *Women and Religion in early America 1600-1850. The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions*, London-New York, 1999, p.133-134; R. MAGRAW, *France* [see n.31], p.171.

⁴³ P.STARKEY, *Women religious and religious women. Faith and practice in women's lives*, in *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*, London-New York, 2006, p.206.

⁴⁴ See e.g. M. BORUTTA, *Antikatholizismus, Männlichkeit und Moderne. Die diskursive Feminisierung des Katholizismus in Deutschland und Italien (1850-1900)*, AIM-Gender Tagung, s.l., s.d., <http://www.ruendal.de/aim/pdfs/Borutta.pdf>.

⁴⁵ L.GEVERS, *Gezin, religie en moderniteit. Visie en strategie van de Belgische bisschoppen (1830-1940)*, in *Trajecta*, 4 (1995), p.106-110.

⁴⁶ P.SERVAIS, *The Church and the family in Belgium, 1850-1914*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 3-4 (2001), p.635.

⁴⁷ S.n., *Religieuze thematiek in de Belgische kunst. 1875-1985*, 1986, Brussel, p.20, p.102, p.108, p.109, p.112, p. 113, p.131, p.141, p.145, p.146.

images of popular piety represent historical realities, thorough research of art history is required. However, it can be said that they at least represent a prevalent discourse. Though the works of these Belgian painters do not prove women were the principal participants in processions and pilgrimages, they do prove it was on everyone's mind. In the prevalent discourse piety was associated with femininity.

This dialogue is not exclusive to Christian circles. For instance, a recurrent argument for socialist resistance to granting women voting rights was the potential forced influence priests could exert on women's voting behaviour.⁴⁸ Whether this influence was real or not, the link between women and piety resulted in socialist men considering women unfit for politics. In 19th Century liberal discussions regarding education, this undercurrent of female piety is present as well. 'The liberal educational emancipation adagio is clearly sexualised: boys' education served as a lever towards political democratisation, while girls were educated to distance women from the Church's influences.'⁴⁹ Liberals share the same opinion as Catholics, regarding women as being important to education. However, liberals wish for women to extricate themselves from prejudice and superstition. Expanding on this Jan Art and Thomas Buerman argue in more recent articles that anti-clerical statements were partly prompted by anti-clerical fears of women's religiousness in general and the often going hand in hand influence of the priest as confessor or spiritual director of woman in particular.⁵⁰

Confessional and geographical nuances

The study of the 'feminisation of Christianity' has undergone a remarkable shift. At the start of the Seventies, Barbara Welter coined the term to describe the evolution of Protestant faith in the United States. Over the course of the years, 'feminisation' was a subject in analyses of both Protestant and Catholic faith, and came to be considered more and more a typically Catholic phenomenon.⁵¹ Current research proves that this confessional exclusivity is too strict, yet it also points at the differences in definitions and explanations that are prevalent in the studies of the various denominations.

When McLeod first compares 'feminisation' in Protestantism and Catholicism, he remarks that there are indications that the difference in church involvement between men and women, at the very latest at the start of the 20th Century, was higher for Catholicism than Protestantism. He correlates the men's disassociation from faith with the clear separation of laymen's and clergymen's tasks. Those denominations that had a less strict division of both tasks, such as the Lutheran and reformed church, had less of a 'gender gap'. He sees a possible explanation in the fact that more anti-clerical tendencies originate within those denominations that do have the strict division, such as Catholic and Anglican churches. The disassociation of faith

⁴⁸ D.KEYMOLEN, *Stap voor stap: geschiedenis van de vrouwenemancipatie in België*, Brussel, 1991, p.52.

⁴⁹ G.DENECKERE, *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België. 1878-1905*, in *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België. I. 1830-1905*, Tielt, 2005, p.613.

⁵⁰ J.Art, T.Buerman, *Is de katholieke man wel een echte vent? Suggesties voor onderzoek naar mannelijkheid, katholicisme en antiklerikalisme*, in *Historica*, 30 (2007), p.27-29; Id., *Anticléricalisme et genre: le prêtre catholique, principal défi à l'image hégémonique de l'homme du 19^e siècle*, in *Sextant*, 2008 [in print].

⁵¹ B.WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.137; H. MC LEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.137-138; O.HEILBRONNER, *From Ghetto to Ghetto: The Place of German Catholic Society in Recent Historiography*, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), p.476.

facilitated by these anti-clerical tendencies also helps along the ‘gender gap’, as they get hold of men more easily than women. Men would also have more difficulties with being restricted from performing rituals as they, more than women, were in the habit of fulfilling public roles. Even though the evolution of events in France, Spain and Italy seems to confirm McLeod’s theory, the German, English and Scandinavian situations paint a different picture. The Catholic men in these countries seemed to distance themselves less than their Protestant counterparts.⁵²

At the very least, this difference in church involvement of European men is an indicator that ‘feminisation’ not only shows variations in content, but several confessional and geographical nuances as well. An influential factor that cannot be stressed enough is the ‘politicization of religion’. As religion has a role in the creation of one’s own identity, disassociation can be seen as a deliberate rebellion against the status quo, as well as rebelling against the church justifying this situation. Adherence to one’s church cannot be considered separate from the church’s political factor of opposition. Margaret Anderson for instance, has her doubts about the feminisation of the German Catholic Church as it was too closely involved in the political battle for Catholic rights until at least 1871. She deems it unlikely that, in a country where only men could vote, they would give up their place in the Church to women. Anderson is not the only critical voice in the research into German Christianity. There are others with doubts about certain aspects of ‘feminisation’. Lucian Hölscher claims there has never been a ‘generell fortschreitenden Feminisierung der Kirchen im 19. Jahrhundert’ and nuances are necessary, primarily concerning men’s piety.⁵³ The central idea to be culled from these critical points of view on the thesis of feminisation is that men’s involvement varies according to the primary function of church adherence.

Recurring themes in the feminisation thesis: chronology and ‘dimorphism’

‘Sexual dimorphism’?

Despite the differences in content, creed and geography, a number of basic elements seem to pop up in studies of different denominations in both Europe and North America. Studies of both Protestant and Catholic confessions look for a connection between ‘feminisation’ and the divergent attitudes of men and women, called ‘sexual dimorphism’. This not only refers to differences in church attendance but also to differences in belief and religious attitude, as is the case in Richard

⁵² H. MC LEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.134, p.136, p.139-140; H. MC LEOD, *Secularisation in Western Europe. 1848-1914*, New York, 2000, p.125-127, p.129; B. SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.142; D. HALL, *Religion and Secularisation in America: a Cultural Approach*, in *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa. Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung*, Göttingen, 1997, p.129; R. SCHLÖGL, *Sünderin, Heilige oder Hausfrau? Katholische Kirche und weibliche Frömmigkeit um 1800*, in *Wunderbare Erscheinungen. Frauen und katholische Frömmigkeit im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Paderborn-Wien, 1995, p.23.

⁵³ M.ANDERSON, *The Limits of Secularization: on the problem of Catholic revival in nineteenth-century Germany*, in *The Historical Journal*, 38, 1995, p.654; I.GÖTZ VON OLENHUSEN, *Geschlechterrollen, Jugend und Religion. Deutschland 1900-1933*, in *Erziehung der Menschengeschlechter; Studien zur Religion, Sozialisation und Bildung in Europa seit der Aufklärung*, Weinheim, 1996, p.50; R. MEIWES, ‘Arbeiterinnen’ [see n.3], p.16-19; L.HÖLSCHER, *Weibliche Religiosität? Der Einfluss von Religion und Kirche auf die Religiosität von Frauen im 19. Jahrhundert*, in *Erziehung der Menschen-Geschlechter. Studien zur Religion, Sozialisation und Bildung in Europa seit der Aufklärung*, Weinheim, 1996, p.49-50.

Burton's work. Burton interprets the 'dimorphism' as a non- and at times anti-religious male population confronted with predominantly faithful women.⁵⁴ This broad definition at least proves the need for clear descriptions. In Burton's definition, nearly all men belong to the secular side, yet they are allowed room for religion in a stricter definition. The term 'gender gap' has been used to denote the 'results' of sexual dimorphism since it indicates that, because men were leaving and women remained faithful, church practice was out of balance.⁵⁵ Both 'sexual dimorphism' and the 'gender gap' are the expressions of a central idea, perfectly presented by Lynn Abrams for Catholic, Protestant as well as Orthodox countries, i.e. religion was something 'that women did and men often tried to avoid'.⁵⁶

This first definition of the sex difference, which contains both 'sexual dimorphism' and the 'gender gap' has as its counterpart a different, 'generalising' premise, focusing on the active role of women during religious revivals and movements. Hugh McLeod's thesis connects 'feminisation' to 'secularisation'. He states that those communities where religion lost some of its influence, the tendency for secularisation was present far quicker in men. For the regions that experienced religious revivals, women took the initiative and ensured religion retained an important place. Research into both Protestant and Catholic faith contains allusions to this important role reserved to women at the start of religious movements and re-awakenings. Women played the leading role, both when churches were being reopened after the 1790 French Revolutionary persecution and when converting families during the American Second Great Awakening in the 1820s and 1830s.⁵⁷ Little surprise that Oded Heilbrunner calls women 'the human ammunition of the Catholic Church' and 'the popular force that moved the wheels of ultramontaniam'.⁵⁸ Despite their important role in religious revival, the prospects for women were limited in both confessions. At the moment religious institutions started to take solid shape, they were relegated to the background, though they could still exert an important amount of influence. Their leading role therefore contrasts sharply to the 'all-male' institutions, the exclusively male leadership. The Catholic Church still holds to this 'Männerbund Kirche', yet on this matter, some dissonance is present as compared to the Protestant creeds. Some of the Protestant faiths had by now even sworn in their first woman priests.⁵⁹

McLeod's thesis sets the actively religious women against the increasingly secular men. Inside the male 'secular tendencies', he claims there is a difference between an active and a passive form. Men who passively remove themselves from church stop actively attending Mass, but made no negative remarks about the religious practice of their women or friends. Actively removing oneself however always came with ridicule and derision of the active practitioners. The geographic variations in men's

⁵⁴ R.BURTON, *Holy Tears* [see n.31], p.XXI.

⁵⁵ K.CHADWICK, *Catholicism, politics and society in twentieth-century France*, Liverpool, 2000, p.220; C. LANGLOIS, *Le catholicisme* [see n.12], p.30 R. GIBSON, *Le Catholicisme et les femmes en France au XIXe siècle*, in *Revue de l'Histoire de l'Eglise en France*, 79 (1993), p.64.

⁵⁶ L.ABRAMS, *Body* [see n.6], p.37-38.

⁵⁷ H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.8, p.144; H.MCLEOD, *Secularisation* [see n.50], p.125; R. MEIWES, 'Arbeiterinnen' [see n.3], p.19, p.248.

⁵⁸ O.HEILBRUNNER, *From Ghetto* [see n.49], p. 475.

⁵⁹ R.HERING, *Männerbund Kirche? Geschlechterkonstruktionen im religiösen Raum*, in *Mitteilungender Evangelischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte*, 20 (2002), p.57; D.VALENZE, *Gender in the Formation of European Power, 1750-1914*, in *A Companion to Gender History*, Malden-Oxford, 2004, p.467; I. GÖTZ VON OLENHUSEN, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.41], p.16; P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p.205.

Church adherence are staggering. For McLeod, France, England and Germany are where the distance between religious women and secular men is increasing, regardless of social class and present in all large religious groups. The Church adherence was quite large for France, but less so in England.⁶⁰

Setting the historical stage: chronology of 'feminisation'

Male truancy is often linked to a number of economic, political and societal processes, whether or not stimulated by the effects of the French and the American Revolutions. Variations in content, geography and creed make it difficult to calculate the exact time boundaries, yet most research seems to find a temporal consensus in the 19th Century as to the centre of gravity for 'Christianity's feminisation', though impetuses in anterior centuries are not excluded.⁶¹ As a result, when dating events, exact descriptions are vital, and one must take the different interpretations of feminisation into account. For instance, in the 17th Century in North America, women apparently already dominated religious practice, though according to Gail Berderman, Protestant religion in the 17th and 18th Century was rather gender neutral, i.e. neither predominantly male nor female.⁶²

The active involvement of women led researchers of both Protestant and Catholic faith to situate the road to 'feminisation' as early as the 17th or 18th Century. In the case of Catholicism, and more specifically French Catholicism, these first steps are recognised in the reaction to and the active involvement in the Contra-reformation.⁶³ The beginnings of feminisation of Europe's Puritanism, Jansenism and Pietism can also be traced back to the 17th Century because of the women's important role in conversions, predictions and distribution of pamphlets.⁶⁴ However, the French Revolution is generally regarded as the beginning of French Catholicism's 'feminisation', alluding mainly to women's active roles in the resistance. They sheltered priests, organised clandestine Mass and led demonstrations against the desecration of churches and burial grounds. This era of revolution would also greatly benefit the feminisation of content.⁶⁵ As laymen were forced to practice their beliefs in a clandestine manner, these years of revolution bore witness to the introduction of a 'private, informal, and female-centred form of worship, replacing the 18th Century's male- and community-centred religion of state'.⁶⁶ Not all historians agree on the French Revolution as the impetus, seeing it rather as a fracture point: this was the moment where the appreciation of the bond between women and Catholicism ceased to be positive. The repercussions of this negative appreciation would be felt in the political and societal status of 19th Century women in France. The Church's answer to

⁶⁰ H.MCLEOD, *Secularisation* [see n.50], p.125-127; D.HALL, *Religion* [see n.50], p.129; R.SCHLÖGL, *Sünderin* [see n.50], p.23.

⁶¹ W.DAMBERG, P.PASTURE, *Restoration and Erosion of Pillarized Catholicism in Western Europe 1945-1970*, in *The transformation of the Christian Churches in Western Europe 1945-2000*, (ter perse); C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.58-59.

⁶² G.BEDERMAN, 'The women have had charge of the Church work long enough.' *The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism*, in *American Quarterly*, 41 (1989), p.435.

⁶³ R.GIBSON, *Le catholicisme* [see n.53], p.71.

⁶⁴ M. WIESNER, *Religion*, in *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 1993, p.203-205.

⁶⁵ P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p.185-186; G.BOCK, *Women* [see n.14], p.59-62.

⁶⁶ P.SEELEY, *O Sainte Mere: Liberalism and the Socialization of Catholic Men in Nineteenth-Century France*, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), p.864.

the political situation that sprang from the revolutions could also benefit 'feminisation'. The French Catholics reacted to the limitation of their authority by further stimulating French women's charity activities, the only kind of religious activity allowed by the French government.⁶⁷

Aside from Europe, the feminisation process started, according to various historians, earlier than the 19th Century for North America as well. As with the French Revolution, its American counterpart played the decisive role. Harry Stout and Catherine Brekus depict the Revolution as a turning point, yet they stress that it was a fracture point for male and not for female religiosity. At a time when churches were no longer the centre of New England communities, men as well as women looked for new ways to give shape and meaning to their lives in the wake of such a dramatic political and economic upheaval. Men had access to political and social organisations as well as religious. The only public role for women to play was as members of the church or through religiously inspired volunteer work. This did offer them a sense of stability and community similar to what men experienced in their other options. The increased piety of women was a result of the Church's increased dependence on their efforts and the sermons were adapted to better suit the female audience.⁶⁸ According to Patricia Bonomi, the feminisation of North America's congregational churches is more the result of the reinforced institutional structure in the 18th Century, than of a secularisation of the male sphere. Though initially, laymen were granted important tasks, they were once again deprived of them when the churches became institutionalised. Subsequently, men perceived their involvement as less of a challenge, fled the scene, thus leaving room for the women. Bonomi views the feminisation tendency as emerging most clearly in those creeds with a strong professional clergy.⁶⁹

Polarising 'men' and 'women'

Despite these impulses during the 17th and 18th Century in both Europe and America, feminisation is still largely situated in the 19th Century. The 'separate spheres', the accompanying 'tasks' for both sexes and the two-sexes theory played heavily into this. The emergence of 'polarised sexual identities' was linked to the doctrine of the two sexes, gradually replacing the one-sex theory in 18th Century medicine and anthropology. This new theory defined the woman as a 'natural being' and the man as a 'cultural being'. The different sexual organs were the basis for characteristics attributed to both sexes, which were then linked to certain social expectations. Characteristics attributed to one sex were complimentary to those attributed to the other sex. Men were associated with intelligence, women with emotions. Women were expected to show not only modesty, patience, self-sacrifice, homeliness and maternity, but piety was considered a natural and required characteristic as well. Irreligiousness became a natural part of masculinity and parallel to the seeming identification of piety as feminine, the concept of 'maleness of impiety' was developed. If women were to stray from this pious ideal, they were

⁶⁷ C.FORD, *Divided Houses* [see n.1], p.35-36; S.CURTIS, *Charitable Ladies* [see n.16], p.124; R.BURTON, *Holy Tears* [see n.31], p.XXI.

⁶⁸ H.STOUT, C.BREKUS, *Declension* [see n.2], p.31-33. A similar remark is found in Barbara Welter's work. B.WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.137-138.

⁶⁹ Her counter example is the balanced situation in the Quaker and Lutheran communities (as opposed to German and Swedish churches which were said to be lacking in balance) P.BONOMI, *Under the Cope of Heaven. Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*, Oxford-New York, 1986, p.112-114.

judged unnatural or unfeminine. Research into both Catholicism and Protestantism makes reference to contemporary witness accounts considering women as 'naturally pious' beings.⁷⁰ This also held for Belgium. 'The Christian 'role patterns' between men - dominant and protective - and women - dependent and caring - is reflected in Belgian Civil Law. Church and state find their common ground in the patriarchal tradition, which lends legitimacy to the idea of the woman's (natural) weakness and her submitting to the male head of the family.'⁷¹ This is not merely due to the Catholics' important role in 19th Century Belgium, but conforms to the ruling social consensus.

'Separate spheres'?

Along with certain characteristics, both sexes' 'fields of activity' were subject to polarisation in the 19th Century as well, thus contributing to the 'feminisation of Christianity'. Often, this evolution is described as the 'separate spheres', essentially the division between the male public world and the female private world. Though the term is under attack from all sides -neither sex usurped a sphere which was not influenced by the existence or the activities of the other sex and texts on the division of spheres had been going around as early as the late 17th Century - the concept does have its merits in pointing out cultural obsession with sexual differences and their shapes in the 19th Century.⁷² The 'separate spheres' ideology, the division between male and female spheres of influence is said to have first emerged during processes of economic, social and cultural renewal which, according to Norbert Busch, can be summed up as industrialisation and bourgeoisification. The traditional definition of this theory puts the workplace outside of the family atmosphere and squarely in the public field. Women were awarded the 'less important' private atmosphere and were deemed responsible for family and religion. Men took up public affairs by focusing on economic and political activities, areas from which women were excluded. After all, they were expected, armed as they were with their masculine characteristics, to weather competition, aggression and displays of power so frequently present in public affairs.⁷³ Thus, according to the thesis of 'separate spheres', after centuries in the public eye, Christianity was relegated to the private space and included in women's spheres of influence. Women not only took care of their own moral code, but that of their husband and children as well. They handed down the basic principles of

⁷⁰ T.LAQUEUR, *Making Sex. Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge-Massachusetts, 1990, p.149-153; R.GIBSON, *Le catholicisme* [see n.53], p.77; N.BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.8], p.208; P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p.188; R.BURTON, *Holy Tears* [see n.31], p.xxii; K.HAUSEN, *Die Polarisierung der 'Geschlechtercharaktere'- Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs-und Familienleben*, in *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas*, Stuttgart, 1976, p.363, p.377; R.SHOEMAKER, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850. The emerge of separate spheres?*, London-New York, 1998, p.15, p.19; C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.61; A.WETTERER, *Konstruktion von Geschlecht. Reproduktionsweisen der Zweigeschlechtlichkeit*, in *Handbuch der Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte. Theorie, Methoden, Empirie*, Wiesbaden, 2004, p.122-127.

⁷¹ G. DENECKERE, *Nieuwe Geschiedenis* [see n.48], p.607-608.

⁷² D.VALENZE, *Gender* [see n.57], p.470; R.NYE, *Masculinities and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*, Oxford, 1993, p.47; R.SHOEMAKER, *Gender* [see n.68], p.31-32. Critical analysis of the separate sphere ideology in A.VICKERY, *Historiographical Review. Golden age to separate spheres? A review of categories and chronology of English women's history*, in *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), p.411-413.

⁷³ B.WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.138-139; N.BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.8], p.207; C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.59, p.63, p.88.

Christian life and protected their relatives from temptation and faithlessness with the only weapon at their disposal: their faith, a 'weapon of the weak'. Mothers dealt more frequently with the task of leading family prayer, a task once belonging to the father of the house. However, the influence of the husband should not be underestimated. They either supported or rebelled against this education. Very often, the fathers' piety or impiety would determine the children's education and their belief systems.⁷⁴

These 'separate spheres', the 'functional differentiation' and the corresponding place assigned to piety, shifted the masculine, community-focused faith into a private and informal belief. Christianity became more 'family oriented' and the mother turned into a central figure. According to Deborah Valenze, the feminisation of Christian content at the start of the 19th Century corresponded with a movement visible in the political landscape 'while religious belief emphasized the importance of family and community, formal political citizenship demanded rationalism and individual autonomy.'⁷⁵ Both the American and the French Revolution brought with them a new definition of masculinity, as the patriarchal model was abandoned in favour of the fraternity ideal. As the Catholic Church remained in favour of the patriarchal idea of masculinity, it was quickly confronted with an increasing number of men advocating the ideals of democracy and fraternity who could not identify with the Church's doctrines. As John Horne puts it, the appeal of Catholicism was equally disproportionate to the appeal of secularised politics based on masculine activism and male political associations. Women were considered the antithesis of this new, civilian ideal of masculinity on the basis of their female 'irrationality' and their dependence on the Catholic Church's paternal authority. At the other end of the spectrum was the civilian, rights bearing, religiously neutral man. Religion was banned from the public to the private and concurrently to religion's privatisation and familiarisation the political virtues were secularised and masculinised.⁷⁶ And yet, caution prevails. Not only were men free to move from one sphere to the other, it is highly improbable that they were not influenced by the private circle or that their religious life and views differed all that much from that of their women. Furthermore, a number of writers considered women to have had a positive influence on society's morals as a whole, including the public field. They therefore also had a certain public role to fulfil.⁷⁷ Additionally, Christianity continued to play an important role in 19th Century politics and the 'politicization of religion' had an important effect on the appeal of different confessions. Moreover, Christianity's influence (e.g. the stress on women's domesticity in Evangelicalism) and the contributions of a feminine piety

⁷⁴ C.FORD, *Religion* [see n.31], p.173; H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.140-141; A.DOUGLAS, *The Feminization* [see n.31], p.19, p.75; T.MERGEL, *Die subtile Macht der Liebe. Geschlecht, Erziehung und Frömmigkeit in katholischen rheinischen Bürgerfamilien 1830-1910*, in *Frauen unter dem Patriarchat der Kirchen. Katholikinnen und Protestantinnen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart-Berlin, 1995, p.27-28, pp.34-36; J.CORRIGAN, *Business of the Heart. Religion and emotion in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, 2002, p.141; L.HÖLSCHER, *Weibliche Religiosität* [see n.51], p.54.

⁷⁵ D.VALENZE, *Gender* [see n.57], p.467.

⁷⁶ P.SEELEY, *O Sainte Mere* [see n.64], p.865; J.HORNE, *Masculinities in politics and war in the age of the nation-states and world wars, 1850-1950*, in *Masculinities in politics and war. Gendering modern history*, Manchester-New York, 2004, p.23.

⁷⁷ J.TOSH, *What should historians do with masculinity? Reflections on nineteenth-century Britain*, in *Gender and history in Western Europe*, London, 1998, p.70; R.SHOEMAKER, *Gender* [see n.68], p. 30-31; J.BAUBÉROT, *De la femme protestante*, in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, 5 vol., t.4, Paris, 1991, p.206. De Vries remarks that much of the research on nineteenth-century British religious practices frames the investigation 'within an implicit engagement of the separate-sphere paradigm'. J.DE VRIES, *Rediscovering Christianity* [see n.2], p.146.

(e.g. American Protestantism regarding civil rights and the abolishment of slavery) in the shaping and lending content to the public field, should by no means be underestimated.⁷⁸ In other words, the ‘separate spheres’ term is particularly convenient as it draws attention to the sexual differences and the social regulations associated with it, however absolute representations are to be avoided completely.

For Belgium a Catholic preoccupation with ‘separate spheres’ and ‘functional differentiation’ can be found in the Belgian catholic educational realm. Karel Van Isacker discussed in his classic work *Mijn land in de kering / 1830-1980* the pedagogical tract *De l'éducation dans les pensionnats de demoiselles* of Mélanie Van Biervliet the headmistress of a boarding school for girls. Van Isacker concludes that in Van Biervliet's school and in other similar institutions girls were educated to appreciate the happiness brought forth by domesticity and made aware of their central role in the household.⁷⁹ A study on the preparatory seminary of Roeselare shows the strong influence the French bishop of Orléans and educationalist Monsignor Dupanloup had on his Belgian colleagues. In agreement with the ideas of Dupanloup it was stressed in Roeselare that wives and husbands to be, will live in different worlds.⁸⁰ This differentiation between a wife's life in her religious home and a man's existence in the irreligious world encompasses an interesting research subject. As early as 1986, it was mentioned by Jan Art how interesting it would be when studying the relationship between layman and clergy, to determine how important internal family relations concerning religiousness were.⁸¹

Aside from establishing that mothers were the main source for transmitting religion for instance by praying with their children, not much else has been researched up to now. And yet, men viewed religion as belonging to the woman's domain and the women's sphere of influence. This greatly affected men's involvement. When the roles of each sex were redistributed in the 19th Century, mothers were assigned the role of educator. ‘The conviction that the rise of the liberal movement has been curtailed by mothers' and spouses' obscurantism, inasmuch as they remain in the clergy's clutches, has been more and more widely accepted [since 1859]. [...] Ever since, the liberals are tormented by the fears of possible conversions, even within the private circle of the family.’⁸² The liberals in Belgium being so disquieted about women's religious influence on children proves that there were suspicions in Belgium about the connection between women and religion, which resulted in an unpleasant side-effect because of the ‘separate spheres’. 19th Century discussions on girls' education may need to be revisited from the feminisation angle.

Filling the ‘gap’: ‘feminisation’ in the twentieth century

The polarisation of the sexes' characteristics, the ideal of the separate spheres and both the French and American Revolutions have been considered contributory to the ‘feminisation of Christianity’. Less research has been done as to whether the feminisation of Christianity is a 20th Century phenomenon as well and which factors

⁷⁸ P.VAN DER VEER, *Imperial Encounters* [see n.27], p.83; S.JUSTER, *The Spirit* [see n.2], p.335.

⁷⁹ K.VAN ISACKER, *Mijn land in de kering / 1830-1980. Deel 1. Een ouderwetse wereld 1830-1914*, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 1978, p.115-116.

⁸⁰ J.STROBBE, *200 jaar dichters, denkers en durvers. Het Klein Seminarie van Roeselare. Biografie van een college*, Tielt, 2007, p.105-107, p.184.

⁸¹ J.ART, *De leek in de kerk tijdens de 19^{de} en 20^{ste} eeuw*, in *Taxandria*, 34 (1986), p.79.

⁸² E.GUBIN, *Het liberale en burgerlijke België*, in *Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België.I. 1830-1905*, Tielt, 2005, p.293. [our translation]

may have contributed to its decline. Generally speaking, a relaxation of the opposition between men and women is assumed to occur at the start of the 20th Century.

McLeod for instance, suggests there are reasons to believe that the 'gap' between men and women is at its widest by the end of the 19th Century and the start of the 20th, in several nations. Roger Magraw's starts from the idea that the 'gender gap' in French Catholicism increased after the Revolution with regards to church attendance, piety and recruitment, only to shrink down again after 1914, when a religious revival occurred as a reaction to the traumas incurred during WWI. WWI is regarded as a turning point by Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen as well, yet more from the perspective of content. She claims that the feminine character of German Catholicism was relegated to the background by the 'Nazionalisierungsschub' during the war.⁸³

Brown, who studied the British case, concluded that the 'gender imbalance' became less prominent by the 60s. He attributes this to the changes in the moral fabric that started in the sixties and resulted in Christian doctrine no longer being the guide for all actions (e.g. the increase in illegitimate children).⁸⁴ Despite the alleviated tension these changes brought about, the imbalance between the sexes is still considered a 20th Century phenomenon as well. This is also the conclusion made by Tony Walter and Grace Davie, who did research into both church attendance and faith. 'In Western societies influenced by Christianity, women are more religious than men on virtually every measure.' Geert Hofstede, whose work has been mentioned previously, draws a similar conclusion.⁸⁵

Pious women: introducing the 'femina religiosa'

Research into the 'feminisation of Christianity' has brought along a remarkable shift in history-writing. Before, the 'homo religiosus' was regarded as a 'vir religiosus' and research was characterised by a subconscious androcentrism, the most recent research however puts the focus on the 'femina religiosa'. This paradigm shift is closely linked to the recent interest of women's studies for Christianity (Seventies in America and Eighties in Europe). It is no longer regarded as a solely limiting and constricting factor in women's lives. Now, its emancipating and identity reinforcing qualities are taken into account as well. However, gender studies' renewed attention does not offer a balance in research subjects. Analyses of the religious field from a gender perspective very rarely have men as their chosen subject and 'feminisation of Christianity' studies hardly take them into account and focus on women.⁸⁶ Caroline Ford for instance, points out that the 19th Century developed different types of the '*femme chrétienne*'. One 'type', which stressed the domesticated role of the woman, offered legitimacy to the woman's subjugation and could be found in plenty of normative literature while the other 'type' challenged the existing codes of conduct: f.i. professional religious women benefited from the right of self-determination of

⁸³ I.GÖTZ VON OLENHUSEN, *Geschlechterrollen* [see n.51], p.243.

⁸⁴ C.BROWN, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*, London-New York, 2006, p.14, p.30-31.

⁸⁵ T.WALTER, G.DAVIE, *The religiosity of women in the modern West*, in *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49 (1998), p.640, p.642; G. HOFSTEDE (e.a.), *Masculinity and Femininity. The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures*, Thousand Oaks, 1998, p.289.

⁸⁶ B.HELLER, *Religionen: Geschlecht und Religion- Revision des Homo Religiosus*, in *Handbuch der Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung. Theorie, Methoden, Empirie*, Wiesbaden, 2004, p.610, p.612; U.KING, *Religion* [see n.4], p.75-76; H.MCLEOD, *New Perspectives* [see n.1], p.140; DUJARDIN, C., *Gender: een beloftevolle invalhoek voor de studie van missie en zending*, in *Trajecta*, 12 (2003), p.288; D.VALENZE, *Gender* [see n.57], p.467; R.HERING, *Männerbund* [see n.57], p.61.

person and property. Furthermore, the idealised type of the *'femme forte'*, the virtuous Catholic woman who was active in charity work, evolved. She leaped from *'dame patronesse'* to *'la militante'* at the start of the 20th Century. This new woman, sculpted by a Catholic militant movement, was prone to action yet did not display the semi-masculine characteristics seemingly apparent in feminists.⁸⁷ The same distinction could be made for Catholic men: there are the *'homme d'oeuvre'* and the *'militant'*. Brown however, makes other distinctions within the idealised type and identifies *'the missionary'*, *'the clergyman'*, *'the feminised convertee'*.⁸⁸

Even though women are the primary subject of this kind of research, the differing attitudes suggested by 'sexual dimorphism' require a double explanation. On the one hand, men's 'infidelity' ought to be explained further, taking into account the necessary modifications: does this refer merely to church attendance or does it involve all facets of religious life? On the other hand, an argument has to be found why women remained faithful to their religious practice, and even reinforced it. Why did women continue to be attracted by a form of Christianity which had such a conservative influence on society in Europe and which was a decisive factor in the preservation of the patriarchy? If women had followed the men's example, there would be no quantitative 'feminisation' of Christianity to speak of. Contemporaries sought and found an explanation for women's piety in the 'natural affinity' of the 'weaker sex'. Research into 'feminisation' offers up three motivations behind women's involvement: Christianity appealed because it was as a means for female auto-confirmation, because it offered instruments to socialise and act or because the clergy strategically acted on women's attentions.

Attracting women: self-realisation

The first of these explanations puts into words the theory that women felt attracted to religion for its opportunities in self-realisation. Research into both Catholicism and Protestantism offers the idea that the 'sacralisation of woman', i.e. women's constant identification with virtue and piety, reinforced women's faith in their own abilities and also contributed to the appeal of 19th Century Christianity.⁸⁹ This can be said to mean both an active or a passive interpretation of the potential for self-realisation. On the one hand women could find personal and spiritual satisfaction in their active involvement in charity, while on the other hand their sense of self worth could get a boost, as their prescribed role of passiveness and sacrifice offered parallels with the attitude of Christ. Furthermore, by participating in religious rituals, they could assert their superiority vis-a-vis men, at least with regards to piety.⁹⁰ Women had very good reasons to stress piety as a 'natural' aspect of their femininity: it not only gained them respect, it also allowed them to access public circles. Their religious activities not

⁸⁷ C. FORD, *Divided Houses* [see n.1], p.14, p.107; M.DE GIORGIO, *La Bonne Catholique* [see n.30], p.179, pp.190-191.

⁸⁸ G.CHOLVY, Y.HILAIRE, *Histoire* [see n.41], p.233-234; C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p. 99-110.

⁸⁹ B.WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.152; C.FORD, *Religion* [see n.31], p.167; C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.59.

⁹⁰ P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p.192; D.BLACKBOURN, *The Catholic Church in Europe since the French Revolution; A Review Article*, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 33 (1991), p.786; S.CURTIS, *Charitable Ladies* [see n.16], p.143-144, p.156; O.HEILBRONNER, *From Ghetto* [see n.49], p.477; N.BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.8], p.210; J.ART, *Mannen als bruiden van de bruidegom?*, in *Sterven voor de Wereld. Een religieus ideaal in het meervoud*, Hilversum, 1997, p.36.

only offered women a means for socialisation, it also helped them gain independence or worked as a source of authority. This was a determining factor in its appeal to female laymen and clergy.

Historical research into the quantitative feminisation of religious personnel and specifically the significant rise of European Catholic congregations during the second half of the 19th Century, greatly stresses the importance of this growth potential. Women who entered into active religious life were offered a means to control their own person, thus granting them a source of authority. Claude Langlois has the following explanation for the marked increase in popularity of French female Catholic congregations: 'In the 19th Century, these congregations are by and far the only to supply jobs for women that are varied and more in particular require a high degree of responsibility, albeit on a slightly specialised job market. This is the obvious source of their success!'⁹¹ Relinde Meiwes' research into German congregations stresses that, aside from professional and educational possibilities, the appeal of life in 19th Century congregations lay primarily in the prospect of being actively involved in the Christian society project.⁹² In turn, the appearance at the start of the 19th Century of Anglican and Protestant deaconesses answers the need for '*d'engagement total manifesté par certaines protestantes*' 'total involvement displayed by some protestant women', without these women gaining access to the '*ministère pastoral*' 'pastoral ministry'. Some of these houses were led by a chaplain, others developed '*une sorte de démocratie féminine*' 'a kind of female democracy'. And yet, according to Gisela Bock, a comparison between the independence of Catholic sisters and Protestant deaconesses shows the disadvantages experienced by the latter: 'Irrespective of the male clerical hierarchy, they were more autonomous than most deaconesses; Catholic congregationists had the right to elect their Mother Superior.'⁹³

Attracting women: sociability

Research into French and German Catholic women in the 19th Century primarily show how they, as opposed to men, had very little possibility for socialisation, independent action or public power. As the Church and its associated organisations were among the only kind of socialisation allowed to women outside of the household, their success was no doubt linked to this.⁹⁴ There are important caveats mentioned when considering this explanation, stressing the male hierarchy which not merely guided women in their activities, it also led them. In other words, complete independence was not a factor and the men's contributions are one reason why it is considered erroneous to speak of a feminisation of the Catholic charities. Bernhard Schneider prefers to call them religious fields with a high or a relative degree of 'feminisation', counting the charities and their clerical supervision among the latter category.⁹⁵

⁹¹ C.LANGLOIS, *Le catholicisme* [see n.12], p.48-49. [our translation]

⁹² R.MEIWES, '*Arbeiterinnen*' [see n.3], p.266-267; C.FORD, *Religion* [see n.31], p.173; H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.145-146.

⁹³ J.BAUBÉROT, *De la femme* [see n.75], p.204-205; G. BOCK, *Women* [see n.14], p.114.

⁹⁴ S.CURTIS, *Charitable Ladies* [see n.16], p.156; H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.145-146; P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p. 184-185, p.191, p.195; R.GIBSON, *Le catholicisme* [see n.53], p.77; R.MEIWES, '*Arbeiterinnen*' [see n.3], p.265, p.267; H.STOUT, C.BREKUS, *Declension* [see n.2], p.31-33.

⁹⁵ P.MCDONOUGH, *Metamorphoses of the Jesuits: Sexual Identity, Gender Roles, and Hierarchy in Catholicism*, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32 (1990), p.326; B.SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.143.

Research into Protestant women also mentions the possibility of independent action and socialisation of women as possible draws.⁹⁶ Patricia Bonomi for instance, describes its appeal to 18th Century women in colonial America as follows: 'Besides spiritual refreshment, religion offered women of energy and intellect an outlet to the wider world, as well as opportunities for self-expression, personal growth, and even leadership' [...] 'many women sought and found in religious life a larger scope for their energy and talents.'⁹⁷ Furthermore, not every action was required to originate from religious sentiments, according to Barbara Welter, American Protestant women regarded missionary activities 'as a way to have an adventure in a good cause...' ⁹⁸

Attracting women: strategy of the clergy

Pat Starkey made an analysis of women's activities in both the Protestant and the Catholic field. Her research offers the conclusion of a double tendency. The first tendency considers female congregations as a means for women to conquer their own spot in the public circles, while the second stresses the primarily limiting aspect of clerical supervision. The support these women received from the Church was considered 'bought' at the cost of subjugating to Church rules and renouncing the competing discussions on female emancipation. This could be seen as a deliberate clerical strategy, an explanation often mentioned in 'feminisation' research. The shifts in content or 'qualitative feminisation' is often regarded as a strategic move as well, often in the context of (ultramontane) Catholicism. The content, for instance, would be more geared towards women in order to avoid their abandoning the church pews as had the men. This resulted e.g. in the revaluation of woman's role. It was considered an investment in the future: women would become mothers and thus future generations would be within the Church's grasp.⁹⁹ One specific result of this strategy was proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: 'As men defected from the Church, the Pope hoped that by according enhanced recognition to the Virgin he would retain women's allegiance and harness the power of Christian mothers in its service. But the price of the enhanced recognition was subordination, offered on terms that stressed the vital role that women as mothers could play in a project that emphasised the importance of the home in the education of future Catholics.'¹⁰⁰ However, Schneider argues it difficult to view these content shifts as deliberate manipulations on the part of the clergy. He refers to the fact that bishops did not give up on the ideal of the Christian pater familias as the substitute of God or assign over religion and a religious education exclusively to women.¹⁰¹

Attracting Belgian women

Indirectly, Belgian research has also looked into the three motivations behind female involvement. The possibility for self-realisation was previously described as a 'mentality in which an increased religious sensitivity went hand in hand with a faith-

⁹⁶ M.LAMBERTS-BENDROTH, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present*, New Haven-London, 1993, p.11, p.16; H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.145-146.

⁹⁷ P.BONOMI, *Under the Cope* [see n.67], p.107-111.

⁹⁸ B. WELTER, *The Feminization* [see n.15], p.143.

⁹⁹ R.SCHLÖGL, *Sünderin* [see n.50], p.16; O.HEILBRONNER, *From Ghetto* [see n.49], p.475, p.477; M.DE GIORGIO, *La bonne Catholique* [see n.30], p.186; T.MERGEL, *Die subtile Macht* [see n.72], p.22; I.GÖTZ VON OLENHUSEN, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.41], p.10.

¹⁰⁰ P.STARKEY, *Women religious* [see n.43], p.193, p.192.

¹⁰¹ B.SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.145-146.

inspired need for action'¹⁰² which increasingly led women towards the Church's social work, such as Sunday schools, mission work and distributing essays. During the 19th Century, laymen women, as opposed to men, had only very limited access to socialisation, independent action or public power. Religious organisations for laypeople gave them access to all three within the limits of a male-dominated institution. The Church and its associated organisations were available to women as a meeting place. This was regarded as one of a limited few of acceptable ways for women to socialise outside of home and hearth, a factor which more than likely explains at least part of the Churches' success. Women in Belgium thus gained *social agency* through organised, albeit religious, philanthropic works.¹⁰³ Whether the same rule holds for Belgium as for France, where rich ladies benefited more from their charities than did the poor or the sick, is difficult to establish.¹⁰⁴ It is clear, however, that 'the wide terrain of action in social service allowed them the opportunity to develop societal functions that brought along self-appreciation and social acclaim.'¹⁰⁵ Expressly taking on societal engagements was directly opposed to Catholic-promoted marriage and the associated role of mother.¹⁰⁶ However, this contradiction was completely ignored. A Catholic mother's role inside the family, i.e. the main provider of religion for her children, was extended to include all of society.¹⁰⁷ In Belgium as well, the woman turned into the most important link in the religious *chain of memory*.¹⁰⁸

The increased growth of female congregations in Belgium was also closely related to the activities these orders entered into. Women entered into charity and education oriented congregations, as opposed to their male counterparts, who were very often assigned to contemplative orders. Hence the suggestion those monasteries 'an sich' offered Belgian women an alternative to family life. Research of female religious in the Diocese of Ghent shows social promotion as an incentive to join as rather the exception than the rule.¹⁰⁹ However in 1951, when it became apparent that the decline in religious vocations was situated primarily among female religious, contemporaries remarked that previously, joining was regarded as socially elevating and from then on, because of numerous circumstances, this view was no longer shared.¹¹⁰

Thus, it seems a valuable idea, within the context of the feminisation thesis, to research the motivations behind women's decisions to enter into an order or congregation in Belgium. Entering into a congregation is to be regarded as a two-fisted dynamic for women to insert themselves in the dominant culture while at the same time look for ways to avoid this, and it would be interesting to integrate the ways in which women dealt with male supervision into the research as well.¹¹¹

¹⁰² J.DE MAEYER, *Les dames* [see n.29], p.111. [our translation]

¹⁰³ J.DE MAEYER, *Les dames* [see n.29], p.119; V.VIAENE, *Belgium* [see n.28], p.174.

¹⁰⁴ S.CURTIS, *Charitable Ladies* [see n.16], p.156.

¹⁰⁵ D.KEYMOLEN, *Stap voor stap* [see n.47], p.47.

¹⁰⁶ J.DE MAEYER, *Relatie en huwelijk in de moderne tijd (ca.1800-ca.1950). Kerkelijke standpunten en strategieën*, in *Levensrituelen. Het huwelijk*, Leuven, 2001, p.41-42.

¹⁰⁷ L.GEVERS, *Gezin* [see n.44], p.106; P.SERVAIS, *The Church* [see n.45], p.633; J.DE MAEYER, *Les dames* [see n.29], p.117-122.

¹⁰⁸ D. HERVIEU-LÉGER, *Religion as a chain of memory*, New Brunswick, 2000, 204 p. [our translation]

¹⁰⁹ R. BOUDENS, *De diocesane clerus en de religieuzen*, in *Het bisdom Gent (1559-19991). Vier eeuwen geschiedenis*, Gent, 1992, p.406.

¹¹⁰ P.LOONTJES, *De huidige crisis in de vrouwelijke kloosterroepingen*, in *Collationes Gandaveses*, 1 (1951), p.210.

¹¹¹ P.WYNANTS, M.HANOTEAU, *La condition féminine des religieuses de vie active en Belgique francophone (19^e-20^e siècles)*, in *Femmes des années 80. Un siècle de condition féminine en Belgique*

Women, contrarily to men, still found room for self-realisation in Church organisations. They were attracted to religion as it gave them the opportunity to subtly undermine the patriarchy.¹¹² It shows that it is not merely important to define feminisation, but to interpret the behaviour of both women as a group in society and as individuals. With regards to both laymen and religious professionals, this paper implies a certain degree of female emancipation within the confines of the Belgian Catholic Church. This is currently quite a hot topic.

It is a widely accepted idea that feminism and Catholicism are mutually exclusive.¹¹³ On the one hand, mistrust of (organised) religion, piety and Churches are all potentially at the origin of feminism, yet we argue this has been fuelled by the Church's current attitude towards women. Conversely, Bart Latré's research shows the low degree of appreciation for feminisation of religion as a source of emancipation, as feminisation was limited to women's traditional *locus*. Latré says: 'It was just a matter of applying to the public sector so-called 'female' qualities of the private sphere, such as raising children and putting oneself aside in the service of others.'¹¹⁴

It is safe to say that congregations for women did pave the way towards preparing the public opinion for the intervention of women in a number of activities. However this has most likely also led to the idea of specific women's professions and to the feminisation of certain professions, primarily in education and welfare work.¹¹⁵ Perhaps the explanation and continued exploration of the emancipatory characteristics of feminisation can be found in the auto-reproductive nature of Catholic education for girls. As such, it is a self-replenishing institute, as religious women recruited from the institutes they were in charge of.¹¹⁶ On top of this, the religious culture permeating the classes and everyday life in school was potentially at the base of the increased bond between women and religion in the 19th Century. Once the education was finished, this bond remained important to the female identity and could be used as a means to legitimise the above-mentioned piety or involvement. As the majority of boys attended institutes of Catholic education as well, research into Catholic secondary education can expose and explain the differences between female and male Catholic culture.¹¹⁷

As for the clergy in Belgium deliberately using religion to manipulate women, the Church would have required virtually the full-scale support of the people in order to exert any real power. In the 19th Century, the Belgian Catholic Church did attempt to actively christen the structures of society.¹¹⁸ Liberties written into the Belgian

(1889-1989), Louvain-la-Neuve, 1989, p.146. Possibly Kristien Suenens (KADOC) addresses these questions in her PHD research *Negentiende-eeuwse vrouwelijke religieuzen en hun congregaties: een groepsportret* hieraan aandacht besteed.

¹¹² J.REED, *A 'female movement': the feminization of nineteenth-century anglo-Catholicism*, in *Anglican and Episcopal Church History*, 57 (1988), p.199-238; T. KSELMAN, *Review of 'Our Lady: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age'*, in *Catholic Historical Review*, 87 (2001), p.338.

¹¹³ A.VAN HEIJST, M.DERKS, *Godsvrucht* [see n.4], p.19.

¹¹⁴ B.LATRÉ, *Feminist Christians in Flanders 1979-1990: a new feminisation?*, in *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 101 (2006), p.673.

¹¹⁵ M.DEPAEPE, H.LAUWERS, F.SIMON, *De feminisering* [see n.12], p.976.

¹¹⁶ P.WYNANTS, *L'école des femmes. Les catholiques Belges et l'enseignement primaire féminin (1842-1860)*, in *Revue Nouvelle*, 77 (1983), p.72.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Buerman (Universiteit Gent) will address this topic in his PHD. T.BUERMAN, *In search of the good Catholic in Belgium, 1750-1950. How to become a good Catholic: The Catholic Education of Boys and Girls in Belgium*, conference paper, Farfa, 2006.

¹¹⁸ J.REMY, *Le défi de la modernité: la stratégie de la hiérarchie catholique en Belgique au XIX et XXe siècles et l'idée de chrétienté*, in *Social Compass*, 34 (1987), p.154.

constitution contributed to this societal initiative. The accessibility of piety to the masses was an important criterion. To achieve it, the higher echelons stimulated mass-worship, which appealed to the heart more than the mind.¹¹⁹ The Virgin Mary in particular played a vital role. However, this does by no means imply the Belgian Catholic Church pursued feminisation. Rather, it went along in a general society trend leaning towards romanticism.¹²⁰ It is inside the boundaries of this tendency that neo-gothic can be found. This Catholic style of art reaches back to the Middle Ages and while picking up on religious elements, also aimed at the broadest possible audience. And yet, the neo-gothic architecture, characterised by logic and brawn, is diametrically opposed to the baroque representations, its formal imagery rebelling against the kitschy devotional cards.¹²¹ This art-form was popular with both high-level and bottom-rung Catholics, proving how 19th Century Catholicism is certainly no one-sided story of feminisation. Continued research should be useful if it looks at residual paternalistic connotations and gender-nuances within the official Catholic Church and the Catholic culture.

The statistically proven female supremacy in religious institutes and in religious life does indeed point to a quantitative 'feminisation' of religion in Belgium. Considering the fact that studies have already hinted at the stimulation and institutionalisation of women's role in charities, research into the theory of feminisation will need to look into how Churches accommodated the role of women and what the consequences were for both parties involved.¹²² Furthermore, when researching modern religiosity, in light of the Church's reaction to 'feminisation' it is strongly advisable to incorporate gender as an important paradigm.¹²³ Finally, the general importance of religion in the 19th Century and the indications regarding religious feminisation have us convinced how essential it is to make religion a factor in every research into 19th Century women's emancipation.

Pious men: reintroducing the 'vir religiosus'

Even though, ever since the 80s, there has been a rise in interest for masculinity in gender studies, religious research only rarely shines the spotlight on the 'vir religiosus'. When presented in research, the man is always introduced in one of two ways. In the first way the continued male presence is stressed and generalising statements such as 'sexual dimorphism' and the 'gender gap' are slightly modified. Church attendance is no longer the standard to which all conclusions are compared and researchers start to pay attention to men's other activities in the religious field. Relinde Meiwes discusses among other things the German Catholic men's activities in politics and in Catholic associations, while Lucian Hölscher makes an account of German Protestant men's self-studies of religious themes. Furthermore, it is pointed out that 'male impiety' need not necessarily imply negative ideas about women's piety, as men often supported their women's initiatives in the religious field and

¹¹⁹ L.GEVERS, *De 'belle époque' van de kerk in België. 1830-1940*, in *Geloven in de Lage Landen? Scharniermomenten in de geschiedenis van het Christendom*, Leuven, 2004, p.174.

¹²⁰ V. VIAENE, *Belgium* [see n.28], p.174.

¹²¹ J.DE MAEYER, *Kunst en Politiek. De Sint-Lucasscholen tussen ultramontaanse orthodoxie en drang naar de maatschappelijke-culturele vernieuwing*, in *De Sint-Lucasscholen en de neogotiek. 1862-1914*, Leuven, 1988, p.43, p.58, p.86.

¹²² J.STENGERS, *Les pratiques anticonceptionnelles in le mariage au xixe et xxe siècle: problèmes humains et attitudes religieuses*, in *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 49 (1971), p.403-481; V.VIAENE, *Belgium* [see n.28], p.173-174.

¹²³ J.ART, *De leek* [see n.77], p.79.

showed faith in the positive influence of Christianity on the morals of their female relatives.¹²⁴

(Re)christening men

The largest body of work, however, does maintain the generalised view of pious women in direct opposition to faithless men in the 19th Century, both in the Catholic and the Protestant faith.¹²⁵ One recurrent explanation refers influenced by the ‘separate spheres’ ideology and refers to the other activities entertained by men. Politics and economy not only took up a great deal of their time, it also deteriorated their loyalty to religion. Furthermore, men were confronted with a new and more appealing ideal for masculinity, which gained prominence after the French Revolution and subsequent events. This ideal was diametrically opposed to the ideal of the patriarch so predominantly present in religion, which relied heavily on the principle of authority.

More and more frequently, men struggled with pious ideals and with ecclesiastical authority in particular, therefore leaving church practice to those whom it fit naturally: their women. Generally speaking for French Catholicism, this transition from youthful piety to grown-up impiety is set in the developmental years prior to adulthood.¹²⁶ Seeley describes the Catholic status quo in 19th Century France. As a result of the separate spheres, men’s youth was influenced mainly by their mothers and they generally received a Christian upbringing. As a part of becoming an adult, Seeley claims, the rite of passage into ‘manhood’ consisted in rejecting their faith. Every so often, some would not perform the rite and remained faithful to their mothers’ religion. These few took up a professional religious career. Seeley described mothers’ influence on the so-called ‘rebellious’ Catholic men as motherhood ‘with a vengeance’.¹²⁷ Research into Protestant America also seems to consider this motherly ‘feminising’ influence as a detrimental occurrence. Any religious connotations are relegated to the background in this research.¹²⁸

As a result, most research regarding religion and masculinity focuses on the need in the 19th Century to rechristen men, mainly through either ‘feminisation’ of the men or a ‘masculinisation’ of Christianity. 19th and 20th Century masculinity as it is described in these studies seems irreconcilable with piety. One school of thought in these studies combines both ideas through the ‘feminisation’ of men. As femininity and piety are almost synonyms, for men to be virtuous, it is implied that they would have to suppress their masculinity. Callum Brown describes how religious tales represent the feminised nature of the converted man and how a truly Christian man had to express a certain reluctance which other men would perceive as ‘feminine’.

Evidently, the ideals offered up were those of a ‘feminised’ and kind-hearted converted person or clergyman. However, non-Christian men could perceive this as feminine, which is why the communication strategy to be employed was deemed

¹²⁴ R.MEIWES, ‘*Arbeiterinnen*’ [see n.3], p.264; L.HÖLSCHER, *Weibliche Religiosität* [see n.51], p.50; H.MCLEOD, *Weibliche Frömmigkeit* [see n.1], p.142-144; H.MCLEOD, *Religion* [see n.76], p.30-31; B.SCHNEIDER, *Feminisierung* [see n.7], p.144.

¹²⁵ C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.73, p.75 e.v.; R. BURTON, *Holy Tears* [see n.31], p.xxii; R. MAGRAW, *France* [see n.31], p.171.

¹²⁶ H.MCLEOD, *Secularisation* [see n.50], p.135.

¹²⁷ P.SEELEY, *O Sainte Mere* [see n.64], p.880, p.889.

¹²⁸ R.CONNELL, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, 2005, p.195; M.KIMMEL, *Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the male Body*, in *Bending Bodies. Moulding Masculinities*, Burlington, 2003, t.2, p.54; T.MERGEL, *Die subtile Macht* [see n.72], p.38.

vitality important. When addressing men, the discussion had to be masculine. This meant speaking powerful words appealing to the group consciousness.¹²⁹

'Masculinisation' of religion?

The other school of thought that has the 'rechristening' idea at its basis, implies that 19th and 20th Century contemporaries were very aware that Christianity was 'feminised' both in form and content. Research going along this line of thought claims that, as a reaction to the 'feminisation', a number of different currents emerged focusing expressly on men and attempting to set them once more on the right path. Piety and masculinity could be combined by 'masculinising' aspects of form and content of the religious experience. Research into Protestant movements such as *Muscular Christianity* and the *Men and Religion Forward Movement* should be considered from this point of view, along with the attempts at 'masculinising' the (Catholic) rites of the Sacred Heart in Germany. When discussing the alleged appeal of these movements, historians generally refer to the same characteristics.

From the point of view of content, to these historians, 'masculinisation' was a series of reactions to the 'feminised' image of Jesus combined with a tendency to avoid sentimentality and an overtly soft and sweet tone of voice as often as possible. The focus on rationality, men's input, patriotism and Christianity linked directly to social problems were all deemed strategic moves. When discussing form, research points to the absorption of 'masculine' elements such as sports, of business world elements such as advertising and of a bureaucratic organisation.¹³⁰

These studies suggest that religious organisations went to great lengths to adjust their ideal of masculinity to the 'hegemonic ideal of masculinity'. A succinct and ideal description is given by Tosh: 'gender norms to which most men subscribe, whether or not they fully enact them'.¹³¹ From this point of view, it is easy to understand the appeal of Muscular Christianity, which focuses on self-control, self-realisation and the body. Even the Catholic dogma of infallibility is tied to this masculine ideal: after all, the concept of hegemonic masculinity found fertile soil in the implicit infallibility paradigm for 'the' man *an sich*. According to Wolfgang Schmale, the Catholic Church as an institution even went so far as to incorporate a number of vital aspects of the hegemonic ideal into its organisation: it became more authoritarian, hierarchical and absolute than ever before.¹³²

Though the formal characteristics are typical to the Protestant movements and certain aspects of content lack prominence, when approaching Catholic associations from this angle, they bear strong resemblances. At the end of the 19th and the start of the 20th Century, all these movements were characterised by being accessible

¹²⁹ C.BROWN, *The death* [see n.41], p.92-93, p.108; C. BROWN, *Religion* [see n.80], p.69, p.99-110. Gill also referred to the fear that Christianity would be seen as an effeminate religion. S.GILL, *How muscular was Victorian Christianity? Thomas Hughes and the cult of Christian manliness reconsidered*, in *Studies in Church History*, 34 (1998), p.425.

¹³⁰ C. PUTNEY, *Muscular Christianity. Manhood and Sports in Protestant America 1880-1920*, Cambridge-Massachusetts, p.3, p.41, p.92, p.98; N.WATSON, S.WEIR, S.FRIEND, *The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond*, in *Journal of Religion and Society*, 7 (2005), p.2, p.5; D.HALL, *Religion* [see n.50], p.3-13; G. BEDERMAN, *The women* [see n.60], p.432, p.440-441, p.456, p.458; N.BUSCH, *Die Feminisierung* [see n.8], p.216-217; S.JUSTER, *The Spirit* [see n.2], p.352.

¹³¹ J.TOSH, *Hegemonic masculinity and the history of gender*, in *Masculinities in politics and war. Gendering modern history*, Manchester, 2004, p.48

¹³² W.SCHMALE, *Geschichte der Männlichkeit in Europa (1450-2000)*, Wien-Köln, 2003, p.229.

exclusively to men and their demonstrative masculinity. According to Tosh's theory, these men-only associations can be considered one of the fields, aside from work and family, where men could assert and confirm their masculinity. Their appearance has been explained, primarily in the case of Protestant movements, as a 'crisis in masculinity'. It is said that by the end of the 19th, start of the 20th Century, women's cultural power had increased to such an extent and the dominant forms of masculinity had been erased by developments in society and politics. As a result, men no longer had an idea of what it took to be a real man. They turned to other groups of men for confirmation, for a homo-social bonding which would in turn re-enforce their male dominance.¹³³ The 'crisis thinking' within these studies requires some nuances. After all, it suggests a sudden, abrupt change in previously stable gender relations. It creates the idea that this crisis is represented as a specific period in history of change with a general effect, thus discounting continuous elements such as age and class. As a result, gender history evolves into the history of broad-stroke events.¹³⁴

However, the furthest-reaching and most permanent reaction to 'feminised' Christianity is considered to be not an association of men but the American evangelical fundamentalism to which women were strongly attracted as well. At the end of the 19th Century, it grew as a militant, orthodox defence against the liberal influence present in Protestant institutions. At the start of the 20th Century, men perceived their world as being dangerously 'feminised' and attacked this by fiercely asserting their own masculinity, which could be considered as a kind of religious machismo. They emphasised their masculinity while society focused on labelling their piety and sexual self-control as 'feminine'. Contrary to the feminised examples brought up in Brown's dissertation on the English Protestant context, the American fundamentalists produced their own series of decidedly masculine heroes. Their 'fearless example challenged lesser men, in their own religious circles, to engage the forces of apostasy without compromise.'¹³⁵ Conversion narratives came to emphasise victory and power to the detriment of penance and surrender. In 1920, this shift in content within fundamentalism resulted in a complete reversal of the 19th Century model. Fundamentalists claimed women had abandoned their responsibility as natural allies to religion and certainly did not help the world's morals along with mini-skirts and cigarette smoking. Piety transformed into a natural characteristic for men and, because of the increasingly militant ethos of the 20s, the masculine language and imagery gained an even more combatant aspect.¹³⁶

Belgian variety of the 'vir religiosus'

There is little to no research into masculinity in Belgium. Aside from a few exceptions, religious history offers no research which looks specifically into the relationship between men and religion. One of those exceptions is Jan de Maeyer's

¹³³ M.LAMBERTS-BENDROTH, *Fundamentalism* [see n.91], p.19, p.25; J.TOSH, *What should historians* [see n.75], p.69-70; K.LOFTON, *The man stays in the picture: recent Works in religion and masculinity*, in *Religious Studies Review*, 30 (2004), p.24-25; T.KÜHNE, *Männergeschichte als Geschlechtergeschichte*, in *Männergeschichte-Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*, Frankfurt; 1996, p.16; M.KIMMEL, *Consuming Manhood* [see n.123], p.54, p.56-57.

¹³⁴ E.FOYSTER, *Manhood in Early Modern England. Honour, Sex and Marriage*, London-New York, 1999, p.209.

¹³⁵ M.LAMBERTS-BENDROTH, *Fundamentalism* [see n.91], p.20.

¹³⁶ M.LAMBERTS-BENDROTH, *Fundamentalism* [see n.91], p.3, p.6, p.20, p.22, p.64, p.65; M.MUESSE, *Religious Machismo: Masculinity and Fundamentalism*, in *Redeeming Men. Religion and Masculinities*, Louisville, 1996, p.100, p.90

2001 article *Les hommes d'oeuvres en Belgique (1875 - 1919/1921): utopistes néomédiévaux ou hommes politiques*.¹³⁷ The article states that Catholic men, more often than women, would indeed start a political career in the name of their faith and often regarded themselves as knights or missionaries. This proves a lasting involvement of men with religion, who defended both the Church's privileged position in society as well as the lasting cooperation between Church and State. Secondly, their romantic self-image opens up new perspectives for research into men's hegemonic image with regards to Belgian Catholics and more in particular the influence of religion on the construction of this image.

As previously mentioned, foreign research focuses primarily on female characteristics in Catholic masculinity. Jan Art has considered the female characteristics presented in 19th Century male clergy.¹³⁸ Art has a good understanding of the time-specific incidents that led the Church to offer passive virtuousness to young men, yet he wonders why youth accepted the offer of a feminine ideal of living and tries to solve the puzzle from a historical-sociological and psychological angle. It seems the choice is affected most by social elevation and by suppressing conscious and subconscious psychological conflicts. These conclusions could benefit from supplemental research into Catholic men's ideal self-images, as time will cause this Christian men's self-image to change and shift. One study into male clergy in the congregation of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga in the Netherlands shows the different elements of the brotherly ideal, which were in different ways (un)reconcilable with individuals or certain groups of men.¹³⁹ It seems that an analysis of priesthood, which was strongly promoted in Catholic education and of the 19th Century devotion of male saints will show its close relation to research into possible feminisation of men.

In Belgium, traces of men's irreconcilability with faith can be found primarily in their anti-clerical battles. Belgian men did not trust the pastor's increased supervision of their lives. They were even more suspicious as they feared that their wives served as informants to the priests.¹⁴⁰ At a personal level, the men feared that the confessor was widening a chiasm between him and his family. Choices for school and future are made against the will of the father or husband. The confessor's interference with marital matters in particular, which the Church felt was required in order to eradicate the plague of neo-malthusianism, was a source for man's ire. The confessor considered and presented purely recreational sex to his flock as their straying from the righteous path. He cast the woman in the role of the helpless victim and the man in the role of the active sinner.¹⁴¹ Machismo undoubtedly had a role in all of this as well. Pious men were often accused of relinquishing their masculinity and being under their women's thumbs. Women who lived piously, as advocated by the priest '[perhaps] pursued a postponement, a curtailing or a complete abandonment of sexual intercourse.'¹⁴² Though seemingly contradictory, the Catholic Church may have contributed to a form of birth control: a pious woman was offered a legitimate reason to reject recreational sex, thus reducing the risk of unwanted pregnancy. As a result, however, the priest impeded the desires of a man who had a devout woman for a wife.

¹³⁷ DE MAEYER, *Les hommes d'oeuvres* [see n.26], p.185-204.

¹³⁸ J.ART, *Psychologische geschiedenis. Enkele bibliografische orientatiepunten*, in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 27 (1997), p.35-48.

¹³⁹ E.HAGOORT, *De esthetiek van de opoffering*, in *Sterven voor de wereld. Een religious ideaal in meervoud*, Hilversum, 1997, p.49-68.

¹⁴⁰ J.ART, *De leek* [see n.77], p.110.

¹⁴¹ J.STENGERS, *Les pratiques* [see n.117], p.403-481.

¹⁴² J.ART, *De leek* [see n.77], p.114.

There is good reason to believe this is one of the deepest motivations behind the anti-clerical sentiments engendered almost exclusively by men.¹⁴³

Belgian men were further irked by something besides clergymen having knowledge of their pillow talk. They also mistrusted the clergy's influence on their women, such as through confession. Liberal and socialist resistance to women's voting appears to be another expression of their anti-clerical feelings, this time regarding the relationship between women and priests and the possible coercion put upon women's voting habits.¹⁴⁴

The Belgian Catholic Church fought against all manner of pastimes that made their appearance in the modern age, such as going out drinking and sports events. In itself, this was nothing new.¹⁴⁵ However, the 19th Century did differ from previous eras as these pastimes came to be regarded as essential to the male identity. The clergy did not follow this evolution, which was interpreted as un-manly and resulted in a complete rejection. Thus, effeminate clergy-men represented in certain anti-clerical cartoons can be viewed as a reaction to the Church's moralities.¹⁴⁶

In the eyes of his fellow man, the 19th Century priest had feminine aspects wholly irreconcilable with the 19th Century image of man. However, one must steer clear of an easy conclusion regarding Roman-Catholic masculinity. Labelling the ridicule the priestly clothes had to endure as anti-clerical machismo is only one interpretation. On the other hand, the clergy's garment is the most recognisable symbol and therefore an easier element to use in cartoons, pamphlets or theatre, as opposed to e.g. the canonical laws.¹⁴⁷ Similar to the research of the anti-clerical movement in Germany, if data is obtained from the opposite party, research of anti-clerical feelings from the gender perspective may shed an interesting light on both the ideals of the priest and religious people as well as the ideals of the members of the anti-clerical movement.¹⁴⁸

With regards to possible efforts made by the Belgian Catholic Church to amend its ideal of masculinity for it to conform to the 'hegemonic ideal of masculinity', it is recommended to analyse the established patriotism and popular faith during the inter war period, from a gender perspective. As faith is said to have risen from the context of war, this analysis ought to include research into the importance of religion for WWI frontline soldiers.¹⁴⁹ A recent publication does show the vital influence religion had on Belgian soldiers' perseverance. Furthermore, most soldiers turned to the worship of Mary, even though this has been established as an important aspect of feminisation.¹⁵⁰ However, an explanation for these phenomena is not further elaborated upon. Researching soldiers in such a typically masculine environment yet

¹⁴³ J.ART, T.BUERMAN, [see n.80], p.27-29.

¹⁴⁴ D.KEYMOLEN, *Stap voor stap* [see n.47], p.52.

¹⁴⁵ M.CONSTANDT, *Gelovigen in badpak. Katholieken en kusttoerisme 1860-1966*, in *Docendo discimus: liber amicorum Romain van Eenoo*, Gent, 1999, p.737-765; P.ROCHER, *Une nouvelle chevalerie catholique contre le néo-paganisme du sport moderne: l'Eglise catholique et le vélo, xix-xxe siècles*, in *Rêves de chrétienté. Réalités du monde. Imaginaires Catholiques*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2001, p.339-368.

¹⁴⁶ A.MORELLI, *De qui se moque-t-on? Caricatures d'hier et d'aujourd'hui, de Rops à Kroll*, Morlanwez, 2001, p.15-20.

¹⁴⁷ J.BARTIER, *Les Hommes d'Eglise et l'Anticléricalisme au XIXe siècle*, in *Christianisme d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*, Bruxelles, 1979, p.111.

¹⁴⁸ M.GROSS, *The war against Catholicism: Liberalism and the Anti-Catholic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Ann Arbor, 2005, p.185-239.

¹⁴⁹ R. DE PUYDT, *Bouwgeschiedenis*, in *Basiliek Koekelberg*, Brussel-Tielt, 2005, p.21; J.MARX, *De cultus* [see n.34], p.110-111.

¹⁵⁰ B.BENVINDO, *Des hommes en guerre. Les soldats Belges entre ténacité et désillusion 1914-1918*, Bruxelles, p.131-137.

who have accepted such a thoroughly feminine aspect of faith would most certainly lead to interesting conclusions.

One way to answer the question whether Belgian men naturally shared the characteristic of piety and which factors could have contributed to this evolution, could be achieved by researching the Sacred Heart devotion in Belgium, in particular during the inter war period, and through research of the link between Catholicism and typically masculine institutions such as sports.¹⁵¹ It would seem that the Church's initial rejection and later gradual acceptance of competitive sports imported mainly from Great Britain, indicates an attempt to accommodate the men. Several contributions in a publication on Belgian Catholics and sports during the 19th and 20th Century indicate that Catholic education, Flemish Catholic youth associations and the apostolate only fully accepted sports post-WWI, and even then with the customary reservations. However, several authors conclude that the Catholics' acceptance of sports was fuelled primarily by its unmistakable appeal. If the Church had continued to go against the modern trend, the appeal of the Catholic movement would have suffered a serious blow.¹⁵²

Concluding remarks

The feminisation thesis reinforces a gendered perspective in the study of Christianity and thereby offers an opportunity to step away from an androcentric point of view that has dominated the bulk of religious history. However, this feminisation thesis carries in its formulation the potential of a new imbalance- a sole focus on women and femininity- which has to be avoided. More recent research that pays attention to (or even focuses solely on) Christian men nuances a simplified assessment of 'feminisation' and points at tendency of this thesis to evolve in a container concept. A strict definition of the term remains necessary in order to avoid a simplified polarisation between 'men' and 'women'; 'masculinity' and 'femininity', too strict a definition of religiosity and an uncritical preclusion of Christian masculinity.¹⁵³

Belgian research has primarily looked into the quantitative aspect and shows clear indications for the feminisation of religion. However, Belgium is a particularly interesting case for qualitative research thanks to its pillarised society and the various activities related to these pillars. Most Belgian research introduced in this paper does not offer sufficient space for gender differentiation. Even though gender is by no means relegated to the background, the difference in content of the male and female religious identity ought to be researched more thoroughly. The similarities and differences between men and women are not sufficiently linked to each other. The feminisation thesis seeks to offer other authors a theoretical angle to work from.

¹⁵¹ The Sacred Heart is addressed by Tine Van Osselaer (KU Leuven) in her PHD research. T.VAN OSSELAER, *The ideal and the real Catholic. Feminisation and masculinity in Belgian Sacred Heart devotion; sermons and Catholic Action (1750-1950)*, conference paper, 2006, Farfa.

¹⁵² M.D'HOKER, R.RENSEN, J.TOLLENEER, *Voor lichaam en geest. Katholieken, lichamelijke opvoeding en sport in de 19e en 20ste eeuw*, Leuven, 1994, 293 p.

¹⁵³ In order to avoid essentialism and a preclusion of Christian masculinity it might be better to concentrate on differentiation. T. VAN OSSELAER, *'A lot of women have good reason to complain about their husbands' Ideals of Catholic masculinity*, in *Sextant* (forthcoming); and *'From that moment on, I was a man!' Images of the Catholic male in the Sacred Heart Devotion*, unpublished conference paper *Dieu changea de sexe?*, Ghent, 4-6 January 2008.

Abstract

The feminisation thesis reinforces a gendered perspective in the study of Christianity and thereby offers an opportunity to step away from an androcentric point of view that has dominated the bulk of religious history. However, this feminisation thesis carries in its formulation the potential of a new imbalance- a sole focus on women and femininity- which has to be avoided. More recent research that pays attention to (or even focuses solely on) Christian men nuances a simplified assessment of 'feminisation' and points at tendency of this thesis to evolve in a container concept. A strict definition of the term remains necessary in order to avoid a simplified polarisation between 'men' and 'women'; 'masculinity' and 'femininity', too strict a definition of religiosity and an uncritical preclusion of Christian masculinity.

Up till now, the feminisation thesis has not played a very important part in research on Belgian Catholicism. However, various studies might be linked to the different aspects of this thesis and thereby offer preliminary components of a Belgian narrative of 'feminisation'.

Die These von Feminisierung hat die Gender-Perspektive der Religionswissenschaft gestärkt und die Möglichkeit geschaffen, den androzentrischen Blickwinkel zu verlassen, der die Religionsgeschichte dominierte. Diese These hat in sich aber auch die Potenz, ein neues Ungleichgewicht zu schaffen (Schwerpunkt Frauen und Weiblichkeit), welches zu vermeiden ist. Rezente Arbeiten, die sich auch (oder nur) mit christlichen Männern beschäftigen, nuancieren eine simplifizierende Anwendung der Feminisierung und deuten auf die Tendenz dieser These, sich in ein Container-Konzept zu verwandeln. Eine genaue Definition dieses Begriffs bleibt notwendig, wodurch eine simplifizierende Polarisierung zwischen Männern und Frauen; Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit, eine zu enge Definition der Frömmigkeit und ein unkritischer Ausschluss der Christlichen Männlichkeit vermieden werden kann.

Bis jetzt hatte die These der Feminisierung noch keinen großen Anteil an der Katholizismusforschung in Belgien. Aber mehrere Arbeiten können in Verbindung gebracht werden mit den verschiedenen Aspekten der These und somit die ersten Ansätze bieten für ein Belgisches Narrativ der Feminisierung.

L'idée que le christianisme aurait reçu au cours des derniers siècles de plus en plus de caractéristiques féminines a l'avantage de réorienter l'attention des historiens, qui jusqu'il n'y a pas si longtemps, ne consacraient que peu de mots à l'apport des femmes dans l'histoire des églises. Le danger serait de tomber dans l'autre extrême et de ne plus avoir des yeux que pour l'élément féminin. Les récentes recherches sur l'homme chrétien des XIXe et XXe siècles ont montré qu'une féminisation relative du christianisme n'exclut pas l'existence une virilité chrétienne et qu'il est préférable de les étudier ensemble, pour éviter de simplifier ce qui était en fait un phénomène très complexe. Jusqu'à maintenant, peu de recherches ont été consacrées à cet aspect du catholicisme belge. Pourtant, il y a beaucoup à glaner dans ce qui a été écrit sur son histoire, qui peut servir comme prologomènes à une histoire du genre dans le catholicisme européen.