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‘My dream is that I share the bed with only one man’: Perceptions and practices of premarital sex among Catholic women in Belgium

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Abstract

Drawing upon qualitative research with Catholic women who are active in the Church in Belgium, this article sets out to analyse how these women negotiate and manage premarital sexuality. I map their practices, experiences, and strategies, and explore how they make sense of religious and secular norms regarding premarital sexuality. By using two notions as theoretical frameworks, namely religious agency and growth ethics, I argue that combining both can lead to a fertile approach to yielding new insights into the field of religion and sexuality. In so doing, I demonstrate that although not all my interlocutors refrain from sexual relations before marriage, they develop personal sexual ethics, which are distinctly informed by Catholic understandings.

Keywords

agency, Belgium, Catholic women, growth ethics, premarital sexuality

Résumé

À partir d’une recherche qualitative menée auprès de femmes catholiques engagées dans les activités de l’Église belge, cet article propose une analyse de la façon dont ces femmes négocient et gèrent la sexualité prénuptiale. Je passe d’abord en revue leurs pratiques, expériences et stratégies, puis j'examine comment elles donnent un sens aux normes religieuses et laïques qui concernent la sexualité avant le mariage. En utilisant deux

notions comme cadres théoriques, à savoir l'agentivité et l'éthique de la croissance, je soutiens que la combinaison des deux peut conduire à une approche féconde pour de nouvelles perspectives dans le domaine de la religion et de la sexualité. Ce faisant, je démontre que, même si mes interlocutrices ne s'abstiennent pas toutes d'avoir des relations sexuelles avant le mariage, elles développent une éthique sexuelle personnelle, qui repose clairement sur les croyances catholiques.

Mots-clés
agentivité, Belgique, éthique de la croissance, femmes catholiques, sexualité prénuptiale,

Introduction

In contemporary secular Western European societies, the entanglement of gender, religion, and sexuality is perceived as vexed and controversial. Religion, so the story goes, is detrimental to women, thwarts gender and feminist politics, and forms a constraint towards sexuality and sexual practices. It is placed in a binary opposition with the pervasive secularist discourse, in which sexuality is considered to be positive and liberating (Cady and Fessenden, 2013). This imagery is captured by Joan Scott (2009) as *sexularism*, through which she points to the hegemonic trope encompassing on the one hand religion as sex-negative, and on the other secularity as sex-positive. In this regard, sexual abstinence until marriage might be perceived as a peculiar choice, notably in the assumed sexually liberated climate of contemporary society. In addition to this, normative ideas on sexuality have been largely present within Christianity (Yip, 2015), including

viewpoints that can be understood as patriarchal in terms of (female) sexuality and the role of women in relationships and marriage. Yip (2015: 121) describes this relation between Christianity and sexuality as an 'uncomfortable and awkward relationship'.

A specific theme in the field of religion and sexuality is premarital sex. Religious teachings on sexuality are often exclusively related to marriage, and experiences of sexuality before marriage are considered not appropriate or not allowed. This also the case in the Catholic[1] Church (Cavendish, 2003). After marriage, the sacred status of sexuality is emphasised, and sex becomes allowed, even compulsory, for newlyweds. Avishai and Burke (2016: 32) have described this as the 'inhibition paradox'. This is placed in contrast to secular milieus, where the 'good sex' discourse has gained much visibility and popularity over the past decades, particularly in media and popular culture. This discourse is undergirded by the idea that having ample and satisfying sex is key to a happy life (Avishai and Burke, 2016). In spite of this binary line of thinking, scholars have pointed out the diverse and nuanced stances of individual believers with respect to sexuality, and premarital sex in particular (e.g. Beekers, 2016; Sharma, 2011).

This article seeks to further explore these ambivalent, complex, and messy viewpoints and experiences by drawing upon empirical field research. In doing so, I want to shed light on the multiple dimensions of religious and secular understandings with respect to sex and sexuality, in particular premarital sex. The snapshots from my empirical research I present will be analysed via two theoretical approaches. The first is the notion

of religious agency, informed by feminist theory. The second is the notion of growth ethics, stemming from the field of Catholic theological ethics. Throughout this article, I bring together insights from both sociological and theological studies as an interdisciplinary endeavour to build bridges between different fields. I will argue that both theoretical frameworks complement each other and combining them leads to a fertile approach that helps to gain a better understanding of how Catholic women construct and live sexual ethics, and of how these lived ethics are shaped and affected by both secular and religious understandings.

I structure this article as follows. First, I give an introduction of the sociocultural background of this article and I elaborate on the methodology used. Second, I provide an overview of the theoretical approach that combines religious agency and growth ethics. The section that follows will present my empirical research findings. I will map the different practices and experiences regarding premarital sex, and the constituting factors in the deliberation process. I make an analytical distinction between four main strategies that are employed by these women, consisting of processes of negotiation, accommodation, deliberation, and choice-making. Finally, I will bring together insights from gender studies and religious studies to theorise the empirical findings, ending with some concluding remarks.

Flanders, a post-Christian society?

This study takes place in Flanders, the Northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Historically, Flanders has been profoundly influenced by Catholicism (Dupont, 2014). During the last decades, however, Flemish society has witnessed institutional, social, and cultural secularisation[2]. The number of people describing themselves as Catholic sharply decreased in recent decades, and fewer people call upon the Church for life rituals such as baptism and marriage. Additionally, it appears that relatively few young people identify themselves as Catholic (Billiet, 2017). Also, the heritage of the feminist and sexual revolutions of the 1960s is noticeable in the cultural memory of Flemish society. In public debates, Flanders – not unlike other Western European societies – is therefore often imagined as a progressive, secular-liberal, and Enlightened society, with gender equality and sexual freedom as quintessential hallmarks (van den Brandt and Longman, 2017). Following Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008), who have argued that religious and secular formations are co-constitutive, we see that Catholicism continues to benefit from a privileged position, in parallel with the secularisation of society. This is exemplified by the high number of Catholic holy days recognised as national holidays and the vast network of state-funded Catholic-inspired schools and care institutions (van den Brandt, 2014).

Methodology

This article draws upon 27 in-depth interviews with self-identified Catholic women active in the Church who were between 22 and 34 years old at the time of the interviews. By staying within this age range, I focus on women in young adulthood, a life phase that several of my interviewees described as the phase of first sexual experiences, entering into romantic relationships, and starting a family. All women were from a white and middle-class background and identified as heterosexual, except for one woman, who identified as bisexual. The majority of these women were born and raised in a Catholic family; only a few converted from being non-religious to Catholicism as adults. All were active in the diocese of a mid-sized Flemish city. Their involvement in the Church consisted of both paid and voluntary tasks, for example teaching religious education in secondary schools or catechist lessons prior to confirmation, providing pastoral care in nursing homes, and working in family or youth ministries. I deliberately selected women who are active in the Church, because their active engagement presumably indicates that they are strongly committed to Catholic beliefs and teachings and therefore characterised by a certain loyalty towards the Church (Dillen et al., 2015). The respondents were gathered through a snowball technique. All interviews were carried out between March and December 2019, audiotaped, literally transcribed, and coded. The interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis, guided by a topic list. The questions probed general themes – such as religious upbringing and life course – religious activities, and more

specific topics such as being a woman in the Church and experiences and practices concerning romantic relationships and sexuality.[3] This article will specifically centre on the topic of premarital sexuality.

Sexuality was generally brought up as the last topic of the interview – although some women raised the topic themselves – and was sometimes met with unease by my interlocutors. In general, I started asking questions about relationships, commitment, intimacy, and the physical aspects of love more broadly. If I felt that my interviewees were comfortable enough to discuss these topics further, I started asking about sexual matters. Although I did not explicitly ask about what they defined as sexuality or sexual acts, their narratives hinted towards ambiguity concerning what counted as sex, as I will show in the empirical parts of this article. Often, sexuality was implicitly equated with vaginal intercourse. Some women talked about these issues in a disguised manner, using expressions such as 'sharing the bed' and 'saving yourself for marriage', but others spoke freely and frankly about it.

I use a lived religion perspective (McGuire, 2008) both as a methodological tool and an analytic framework to capture the religious subjectivities of these women. Instead of solely focusing on institutional norms and scripts, this perspective takes lived realities into account by foregrounding everyday ideas, practices, and experiences. It unravels the complexity and messiness of fitting religious beliefs into daily life, and shows how individual believers make sense of their lives (McGuire, 2008). Although this notion

differentiates daily experiences and practices from official theological understandings and guidelines, Ammerman (2016) notes that lived religion cannot be separated from religious authorities, and underlines the fluid and adaptive character of the boundaries between the official and the everyday level. Religious practices and official institutions are inextricably linked, both shaping and affecting each other. Investigating religiosity through a lived religion perspective thus sheds light on 'institutions ánd persons, texts ánd rituals, practice ánd theology, things ánd ideas' (Orsi, 2003: 172). Hence, in this article I am interested in examining the ways in which individual believers accommodate and negotiate religious teachings.

Religion and sexuality through the notion of religious agency

In order to understand the participation of women in religion, the notion of religious agency has been of paramount importance (Bracke, 2008). Key in studies investigating women's involvement in religious traditions is the emphasis on the experiences and narratives of religious women themselves. This emphasis revealed a nuanced picture, highlighting the wide range of diverse and creative strategies that women employ in their religious lifestyle (Gemzöe et al., 2016). A central line of inquiry in scholarship on religious agency is tracing the genealogy of the assumed impossibility of women voluntarily engaging in religion. Moreover, this scholarship has criticised the belief that secularisation and modernity will eventually lead to gender equality and women's

(sexual) liberation (Scott, 2009), and the dominant secular-liberal approach when studying gender and religion, which makes use of notions such as individualism, free will, and agency (Mack, 2003; Jouili, 2015). Groundbreaking in this regard was the ethnographic study on the women's piety movement in Cairo by Saba Mahmood (2005), in which she critically unpacks dominant secular-liberal understandings of religion and gender. Drawing upon the work of Mahmood (2005), the lens of religious agency enables us to render visible the self-realisation of a religious subject and to acknowledge the genuine desire of religious women to obey religious authority.

The theoretical notion of religious agency thus makes it possible to understand the various practices, strategies, and forms of embodiment that religious women perform. Furthermore, this opening up of the notion of agency offers potential to interrogate the epistemological frontiers of how scholars on gender and religion make sense of women's involvement in religion, for instance by no longer equating agency with concepts such as freedom of choice, individualism, and autonomy (Bracke, 2008). As such, 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms' (Mahmood, 2005: 15). Other empirical studies that focused on gender and religion in Western European contexts – for example on Orthodox Jewish women in Belgium (Longman, 2007), Muslim women in France and Germany (Jouili, 2015), or Catholic women in Italy (Bracke, 2017) – have similarly argued that the notion

of religious agency proved to be fruitful in capturing the lived experiences of religious women.

The notion of religious agency is also given a central role in the expanding body of literature that particularly focuses on gender, religion, and sexuality (Sharma, 2012). Empirical scholarship has shown that religious women develop myriad strategies and find possibilities to embrace both religiosity and sexuality, enabling themselves to integrate their religiosity into their sexual selves (Schrijvers and Wiering, 2018). Sexual ethics and morals can thus be considered as sites of negotiation where both religious and secular norms come into play. This process of deliberation is expressed in the accounts of my interlocutors. Therefore, the notion of religious agency is a first productive tool to grasp how these women construct sexual ethics, and how these are lived out on an everyday basis.

Religion and sexuality through the notion of growth ethics

The second framework revolves around the notion of growth ethics, which I will utilise through the ideas of its founder, Belgian moral theologian Roger Burggraeve. Burggraeve (2016) originally developed the notion of growth ethics, at times described as an ethics of mercy, in the second half of the 20th century as part of a relational and sexual ethical framework. It conceived an answer to processes of secularisation, through which increasingly fewer (young) people followed Catholic principles in the realm of

relationships and sexuality. While keeping the Catholic teachings in mind, by developing this notion Burggraeve expressed the aspiration to guide young persons to Catholic sexual and relational ethics. Central to the notion of growth ethics is the idea that even in situations that do not (yet), or not anymore, meet formal Catholic expectations, there are possibilities to grow towards, and increasingly inhabit and embody, the Catholic ideal. Although personal and contextual aspects can be taken into account, individuals still have the moral obligation to strive to live according to Catholic sexual norms (Burggraeve, 2011: 92). Examples of situations that do not meet the expectations include premarital sexual relations and cohabitation. The importance of the so-called 'seeds of growth' that are present in every situation is stressed, or the 'lesser goods' as a middle ground in order to achieve the 'higher good' (Burggraeve, 2016).

While looking back on the origins and development of this notion, Burggraeve claims that it fits the more pastoral approach that Pope Francis aims to pursue and the logic of pastoral mercy, as formulated in the text *Amoris Laetitia*[4] (Burggraeve, 2016; Knieps-Port le Roi and Burggraeve, 2015). According to Burggraeve (2016), *Amoris Laetitia* mirrors the rationale of growth ethics. Although the notion of growth ethics is not explicitly mentioned in the text, Pope Francis emphasises the importance of recognising 'constructive elements' in the everyday life of Catholics. Important here is that the Catholic Church does not want to condemn the individuals in these situations, but rather wants to support them in attempting to achieve the Catholic ideal (Burggraeve,

2016). *Amoris Laetitia* expressed the aspiration of the pope to bridge the gap between the Vatican authorities and lay persons, and to cater to the concrete needs and everyday situations of believers. A more pastoral approach was much needed, in particular because of the Church's loss of moral authority on intimate and sexual matters (Galea and Vella, 2016; Knieps-Port le Roi, 2018). Furthermore, the pope urges to believers to rely upon their conscience (Knieps-Port le Roi and Burggraeve, 2015). This shift in ecclesiastical thinking resonates with a contemporary tendency of Catholic theology that aims to ponder ethics and morals from an inductive perspective, based on lay experiences (Cavendish, 2003).

Burggraeve is a renowned theologian in Flanders, and his ideas receive considerable attention in the Flemish Catholic landscape (e.g., in theology studies and religious education). Yet, my interlocutors never mentioned the notion of growth ethics. Accordingly, I employ this notion not as the normative concept as coined by Burggraeve, but as a tool to theorise the actions and practices of my interlocutors in a more inductive manner. As the notion of growth ethics was specifically developed by Burggraeve in the Flemish context of a secularising society, I believe it is an appropriate second tool to further explore the entanglement of religion, secularity, and sexuality more broadly, as it sheds light on how individual believers interpret Catholic teachings.

Lived ethics, practices, and strategies

For almost all of my interlocutors, the topic of premarital sex was a matter that was given much thought. The decision on whether to refrain from sexual relations before marriage was often preceded by an intense and long decision-making process. In the following section, I delve into the narratives of my interlocutors and show how this process was constructed and informed by multiple aspects. The empirical findings that will be presented here reveal the manifold arguments and strategies employed by these women. Furthermore, they will provide insight into how religious and secular norms on sexuality are constantly negotiated by individual believers and how they are lived on an everyday basis. Four viewpoints and their corresponding underpinnings are distinguished here. First, women who strictly do/did not engage in premarital sexual relations before marriage. Second, women who do not aspire to refrain from sexual relations until marriage and reject Catholic teachings in this domain. Third, women who wanted to avoid premarital sex but had sex anyway, for example due to their own theological reasoning or pragmatic arguments. And fourth, women who renegotiate Catholic sexual teachings and who, in their personal ethics, do not see a clash between Catholicism and sexuality.

1. Women who do/did not engage in sexual relations before marriage

The first category I discuss here are the women who do/did not engage in sexual relations before marriage. Their decision to wait with sex until marriage is undergirded by different

motivations. For Nora,[5] refraining from sex before marriage was crucial, as she considers marriage as the only proper and sacred location to experience sexual relations in (Lawler and Salzman, 2019). To support her stance, she referred to a previous relationship she had:

> I experienced in that relationship that the physical part [hugging etc.] is really overwhelming. […] And, I think for me personally, the most important thing would be to wait with that until marriage. Precisely because it is something so intense, and very intimate. […] And also because I would prefer to use no contraception […], all those things belong within the framework of marriage for me, and not before [marriage].

Despite her desire, Nora indicated that her choice to wait would also depend on the standpoint of her future partner. If he would not share her aspiration to wait, she would be willing to reconsider her standpoint. But if the choice were up to her, sex would take place only in the context of marriage. In general, to refrain from sex was not regarded as an easy choice. Some of my interlocutors described it as really difficult, for example Louise:

> I have to be really strict with myself, otherwise I will lose it. And then I won't find it that important anymore. […] Once you cross that border, I would be afraid to lose it. I'm not saying I would, but I would be afraid. So for the moment, I'm really, really prudish [laughs].

Furthermore, the difficulty of waiting with sex was considered to be gendered, and extra challenging for men (Sharma, 2011), as Marthe says: ‘if that man wants to wait for you, as a present, to give yourself completely, then that’s a very beautiful evidence of his love.’

In order to avoid premarital sex, different strategies were employed. A first strategy consists of spatial features, such as avoiding cohabitation or sharing a bed. These women choose to adhere to tradition, thus marrying first and moving in together and having sexual relations afterwards. Marthe told me that she had befriended a couple who cohabitated but slept in different rooms. In her opinion, living like that would be too difficult, so living together could take place only after marriage. Therefore, when for example travelling or going on a weekend away together, Marthe would deliberately book two separate rooms to spend the night in:

> I am fully aware that when you lie together in bed, that… You have to be realistic, and I think that by the choices one makes, that you can avoid that. […] You don’t have to make it too hard for yourself, I think.

A second strategy encompasses an alternative conceptualisation of sexuality and sexual acts. Louise indicated during the interview that she wanted to wait with ‘full’ sexuality until marriage, but hinted that she had done other things in earlier relationships: ‘it’s not much different, it doesn’t make much difference, but, yes, it is still a difference, uh, so no, not really.’ Here we see a distinction between ‘full’ sexuality, which entails penetrative sex. By hinting that she had done other things but ‘not really’, however, she

implies that other forms of sexuality, which are not penetrative, could be tolerated. Other interlocutors expressed similar ideas. Jasmien, for instance, used the word 'growth' to describe a possible sexual trajectory:

> I think that, especially when the wedding approaches, you can go a bit further. That's possible for me, personally I find that, there can be growth in that kind of matters. In the end, it also creates bonding, you know.

Thus, for Jasmien, growing to 'full' sexuality until marriage can be done gradually. Again here, she stresses that this is an ideal image for her, but she is realistic as well. She thinks that it is at least important to have sex with only one person, to wait a long time before having sex, and to know each other properly, particularly in order to 'have the feeling that you will share your life together'. But again, just like Louise, Jasmien wants to wait with what she describes as 'full sexuality' until marriage, because she would only then know that 'he is the one'. She considers her virginity a gift for her future husband. Marthe agrees with the idea of virginity and sexuality as a present as well, and also aspires to wait until marriage: 'precisely because it is such a beautiful present, your body, you have to appreciate it.' Girls are more likely to think of their virginity as a gift than boys, which points to the sexual double standard (Carpenter, 2005). Nevertheless, these women underlined that they wanted their partner to have the same intention. An additional argument for Marthe to wait with sexual relations is that 'God is not yet among the couple'. With this she refers to the sacrament of marriage, through which God is

manifested in front of the couple. As long as this does not take place, she prefers to refrain from sex.

2. Women who reject Catholic teachings regarding premarital sexuality

The second category I discuss here is the category of women who reject Catholic teachings regarding premarital sexuality. Only a few women regarded waiting as not necessary, and even as conservative and old-fashioned. For example, Helena said the following: 'I mean, who has ever [stuck to that]? Yeah, there are persons who stick to that […]. That's fine for them, but yeah, I think that's outdated.' The rhetorical question of Helena caught my attention here. Her wondering if anyone would ever wait until marriage is interesting precisely because she was one of the few interlocutors who stated that she does not engage with the Catholic teachings regarding premarital sex. All other women I spoke with drew upon Catholic understandings regarding relationships and sexuality, even though they did not wait with sex. Helena's narrative is certainly an exception among my interlocutors, together with the story of Katrijn, who identified as bisexual. At the time of the interview, she was in a heterosexual long-term relationship, but she had had a relationship with a woman years ago. Katrijn indicated that her religiosity never clashed with her bisexual identity, and that Catholic teachings never influenced her opinion about (premarital) sexuality. According to her, the Church had nothing to say about her sexual preferences and lifestyle.

3. Women who expressed a genuine desire to refrain from premarital sex, but eventually had sex

The third category consists of women who expressed a genuine desire to refrain from premarital sex, but eventually had sex before their wedding. The arguments that these women use were often informed by secular understandings of sexuality, pragmatism, or personal (re)interpretations of Church teachings, which resulted in adopting a personal stance on theological sexual ethics. In general, although the majority of my interlocutors did not wait with sex until marriage, almost all women I spoke with expressed the clear desire to have only one sex partner. Sexual promiscuity or having multiple sex partners was not in line with their beliefs. Relying upon your conscience and validating personal interpretations is an important theme in these narratives, for instance in the narrative of Julie. When she was younger, Julie believed that it would be 'a bad thing' if she did not wait to have sex. Over the years, she gave the matter a lot of thought and decided not to wait until marriage, something she argued for by saying:

> In fact, getting married would then become too physical, like: ok, now it's allowed to have sex. […] That's one of the reasons why I think that the rule is too strict, because marriage becomes something so banal then. Then getting married is not about love anymore, but just… yes… [a permission to have sex].

Here, we see that Julie attempts to reinterpret the meaning of marriage. Earlier in the interview, she emphasised the importance of marriage, since you can marry only once in

the Church; hence, ‘you have to be really sure’. Precisely because the sacrament of marriage is so important to her, Julie wants it to be much more than just a gateway to experiencing sexuality.

During the interviews, the interlocutors often referred to current society, which increasingly secularised during the last decades (Billiet, 2017). In earlier decades, when Catholicism was much more dominantly present in Flemish society, cohabitation and sexual relations before marriage were out of the question. Thus, marriage was the only gateway to living together and being allowed to have sex with each other. Due to societal transformations such as secularisation and the so-called sexual revolution, the authority of Catholic doctrines pertaining to relational and sexual ethics sharply decreased (Dupont, 2014). The accounts of these women show that they are well informed about the secular understandings of romantic relationships and sexuality. In secular societies, intimate matters such as romantic relationships, marriage, and sexuality are considered to be individual concerns, liberated from religious interference (Giddens, 1992).

The importance of having the ‘security’ of a sustainable, loving, and long-term relationship, even ‘knowing’ that the relationship will last forever, is crucial to these women. This is illustrated in what Marjorie says: ‘I didn’t want to do that [having sex] with everyone. I wanted to have security, [knowing] that we would share our life together. My dream is that I share the bed with only one man.’ In order to have this security, Marjorie waited with sexual relations until her boyfriend proposed to her. From that

moment, she knew that the relationship would evolve into a (Catholic) marriage, and then it felt morally right to have sex. During the interview, she mentioned that her partner had already been married, and thus had already had sex. She confessed that realising she was not the first sexual partner of her husband had been slightly difficult for her, but that she accepted it anyway.

4. Women who do not perceive tensions between Catholic teachings on premarital sex and their personal desires

The fourth and last category I want to discuss here is that of women who do not perceive a tension between Catholic teachings on premarital sex and their personal desires. These women did not find it problematic to have sex before their wedding day. Some women did not explicitly connect sex to marriage but connected it to love and romantic relationships in general, as Stephanie says: 'if people love each other, yeah, that's part of it.' Thus, sex is considered to be part and parcel of a loving and romantic relationship. Jolien underlined the importance of the love aspect and evoked a different conception of marriage (Yip, 2015) by stating that she was 'already married to her husband in her heart' and 'already had decided to spend her life with him'. Whether the love bond was officially recognised by the Church did not matter to her. The most important aspect was the love they shared. For women such as Jolien, it was however essential that sexual acts were performed in a monogamous relationship and for reasons of love, not lust (Schrijvers and Wiering, 2018; Sharma, 2011). Another argument not to wait, is that in order to fully

know your future partner, you have to get acquainted with each other on a sexual level as well, in order to test sexual compatibility. This aligns with the bond between love and sex (Gabb and Fink, 2017), as Paulien says: 'I think you should know each other before marrying. And that's an important aspect of your relationship.' Or as Margot puts it:

> […] let's be honest, it has to 'click' sexually as well, right, to make the relationship work. […] 10% of your relationship is sexuality, and the other 90% is also important. But if that 10% lacks, that would be a shame, I guess. […] So yeah, I think it's normal that people have sex before marrying. Personally, it would be a dealbreaker [if it does not 'click' sexually] for me.

On the other hand, for some of my interlocutors, sex is given too much importance in relationships, as Elise said: 'you *have* to have [enough] sex, otherwise there is something wrong in your relationship.' This was a sentiment shared by others as well: there is sometimes too much emphasis on sexual matters, whereby other aspects of the relationship are seen as less important.

Besides relational considerations, some women referred to their personal interpretations of Catholic traditions or their personal bond with God. Paulien does not see her belief as restricting or compelling; rather, she envisions God as a powerful force of love, who would not say what she can or cannot do. Amber also invokes the importance of personal interpretations:

> You know, for me that consists of the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. And the letter of the law, I just don't mind. […] But what really matters to me, the spirit of the law, I am completely behind that. That is, out of respect for yourself, that you don't have sex with someone else day after day. […] I even have the impression that persons who are very strict in these matters, that they, uhm… Yeah, you received a conscience [laughs], you know. That's not to strictly adhere to the letter of the law.

These women emphasised the importance of 'getting to know each other' before marriage, and the link between love, relationships, and sexuality. For them, sexuality is not confined to the sacrament of marriage, as long as it takes place within the contours of a loving relationship.

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Sometimes, references to dominant (secular) relation-making processes[6] were made during the interviews, such as the customary practice of cohabitation. Simultaneously, however, these women formulate a critique on a number of what they considered to be secular sexual practices, such as having (too) many sexual partners or not waiting long enough to initiate sexual practices. In their opinion, the sexualisation of (secular) society has gone too far, and sex is given too much weight and attention, or as Elise says: 'everything is sexual, and everyone should have sex, by preference as much as possible, and with as many partners as possible.'

With this quote, Elise points out a paradoxical idea that I encountered many times during the interviews. On the one hand, current conceptualisations of sexuality are criticised, precisely because they are too present and visible in contemporary society – exemplified by 'the compulsory sex scene in films' or 'sex everywhere on screens and in advertisements'. On the other hand, some of these women perceive sexuality as important enough to reserve for, at least, a sustainable and committed relationship, and others see it as reserved exclusively for the framework of marriage. The moment that sexual contact can take place is negotiable for some women. In some cases, like Jasmien's, the use of the words 'trajectory' and 'growth' is interesting to note. Using these terms, she indicates that certain sexual acts could occur, as long as 'full sexuality' is realised only after marriage. Words and phrases such as 'full sexuality', 'other things', 'trajectory towards sex', which I encountered during the interviews, raise questions on what constitutes and defines a sexual act or practice (Beekers and Schrijvers, 2020; Page and Shipley, 2020). Hitherto, the meaning of sexuality seems to emphasise penetration and thus entails a penile-vaginal outlook on sexual practices. The loss of virginity is commonly considered to occur through vaginal sex and not through other forms of sex, such as oral or manual sex. This is captured by the concept of technical virginity (Carpenter and Kettrey, 2015) or, put simply: 'everything but' (Carpenter, 2005: 92). Therefore, unpacking the notion of sexuality, as informed by heteronormative understandings (Jackson, 2006), is necessary. According to Sharma (2012: 137), her interlocutors did not confine sexuality

‘[…] to traditional notions of sexual intercourse, genital masturbation or heterosexuality; rather, it also includes sexual desire and a range of sexual experiences [and] expressions […]’. Indeed, many of my interlocutors indicated that holding hands, kissing, or cuddling each other would not be considered problematic but, on the contrary, fundamental to a romantic relationship. Although some women choose to refrain from sex before marriage, they do not reject developing emotional attachments in a broader sense. Sexuality therefore, as Yip (2010: 668) puts it, ‘encompasses the human capacity for emotional attachment, companionship, and erotic connection’. The narratives of these women urge us to think beyond merely bodily dimensions of sexuality and draw attention to the emotional and relational aspects of sexuality (Yip, 2010).

Through the lenses of agency and growth ethics

By using lived religion and lived sexuality as lenses to scrutinise premarital sexuality (Page and Shipley, 2020), I argue that the women’s lived realities entail more nuances than what seems to be the case at first sight. They enable us to recognise the diverse, creative, and hybrid ways in which individuals make sense of religious doctrines and how they accommodate them in everyday life. Furthermore, they make the alterability of sexual ethics visible, which changes according to the situation and life phase one finds oneself in. As demonstrated in other empirical studies on the intersection between religion and sexuality (e.g. Hoel, 2015; Peumans, 2018; van Klinken, 2019), my interlocutors

interpret religious norms by developing personal and lived sexual ethics. I believe the topic of premarital sexuality makes a compelling case to unravel the messiness of women's lives with regard to religiosity and sexuality.

Applying the two notions of agency and growth ethics offers more insight into how exactly the ethical and moral formation processes of these women are shaped. While agency sprouted from a lively transnational scholarly endeavour to theorise women's experiences within multiple religions, growth ethics specifically evolved in a local Catholic context. The combination of these two concepts is productive on both an empirical and a theoretical level. First, the focus on Catholic women in Flanders provides a coherent argument for integrating a theoretical approach that is grounded in the Flemish context. Second, merging an international scholarly concept with a local concept enables us to theorise the narratives of religious women in their specific sociocultural and historical contexts. Moreover, the notion of growth ethics connects the religious with the secular, since it takes the non-religious sphere as well as religious inspiration into account. In what follows, I argue that the agency these women perform is informed and shaped by growth ethics, underpinned by the aspiration to live a Catholic life.

The decisions, practices, and strategies employed by my interlocutors can be interpreted by using the notion of religious agency, and thus be considered as agentic actions. Namely, although they are well aware of the official standpoints of religious authorities on premarital sex, these women make sense of these norms through their own

lived realities. Relying upon their personal views and needs, they decided by themselves whether to follow the religious principle of waiting with sex until marriage. Hence, they demonstrated agency in multiple ways, ranging from strictly adhering to the norms to negotiating and challenging them. However, in my opinion, this is not the complete picture, as this decision on whether to refrain from sexual relations does not entail that these women would take distance from the Church, nor does it make them less Catholic. On the contrary, their motivation is deeply pervaded by Catholic teachings. Thus, they 'reconfigure secular notions of personal autonomy and modern religiosity such that normative religious authority and inner, individual desire are not constituted by a relationship of opposition, but rather are inextricably linked' (Fernando, 2010: 26).

Therefore, the notion of growth ethics can add an additional interpretive layer to the understanding of these practices and motivations, by providing more insight into how these women come to their decisions. To these women, their actions are not guided by a desire to subvert the norms, but they are rather informed by the aspiration to forge personalised, lived sexual ethics, undoubtedly underpinned by Catholic inspiration. Precisely by constructing theological interventions, such as emphasising the importance of one's conscience, or invoking religious principles – such as the sacred and unbreakable value of marriage – these women confirm their religiosity. Therefore, the notion of growth ethics allows us to grasp the ways in which my interlocutors make sense of their actions and practices. Growth ethics then becomes the moral framework in which their agency

takes place; the *leitmotiv* steering their decision-making processes. I see it as an ethical guide signifying the borderlines of a religiously permitted sexual life, marking what counts as Catholic. Although a few women explicitly stated that the Church should not say anything regarding sexuality, most women found inspiration in ecclesiastical teachings. Rather than strictly following the normative framework of the Church – or 'the letter of the law', as Amber noted – regarding sexuality, much attention and docility was dedicated to the 'spirit of the law' and the moral rationale behind the Church teachings. Subsequently, I argue that these women deliberately subscribe themselves to the Catholic Church and sincerely aspire to be good Catholics, despite not meeting every Catholic norm. As such, growth ethics forms the contours in which religious agency can take place.

Conclusion

In this article, I demonstrated that the deliberation of sexual ethics and norms is complex and situational. Rather than simply following a fixed blueprint, these Catholic women show that they inhabit both religious and secular understandings of sexuality and sexual practices, and negotiate them in everyday life. Moreover, these personal considerations are shaped by various elements and are changeable as a result of pragmatic or personal motivations. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the many layers that constitute religious and sexual practices. I have attempted to argue for the usefulness of combining the perspectives of religious agency and growth ethics. This intervention, on both an

empirical and a theoretical level, sought to contribute to the further theorisation of religious agency by using the notion of growth ethics to analyse the narratives of Catholic women in Flanders. Religious agency goes beyond understanding women's involvement in religion as either oppression or empowerment, while the notion of growth ethics considers the actual and complex positionalities of Catholics, rather than condemning believers who do not meet the norms. Thus, both approaches enable us to take into account the lived realities of individual believers while acknowledging the willingness and endeavours to conduct a pious life, providing insight in the construction of lived ethics.

When analysing the narratives of my interlocutors through these two notions, it becomes clear that these women are fully aware of Catholic ethics and morals concerning premarital sex, yet do not always fulfil those requirements. Still, they want to pursue a religious lifestyle, including personal considerations concerning morals and ethics. However, they comprehend that being religious is more than strictly following the Church doctrines, as it involves freedom of conscience. Through the concept of religious agency, we are able to grasp the ways in which these Catholic women inhabit religious norms and how they perform religiosity in embodied practices. The notion of growth ethics offers insights into how precisely these religious norms are constructed, particularly in relation to sexual morals and ethics. As such, these empirical case studies can help us understand the complexities of the entanglements between gender, religion, and sexuality.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, I utilise ‘Catholic’ instead of ‘Roman Catholic’ to enhance the readability of the text.
2. See Dobbelaere (2002) for his understanding of secularisation in Western European societies – such as Flanders – on three levels: societal, organisational, and individual, and including functional differentiation, laicisation, pillarisation, rationalisation, and a decline in church attendance; and Taylor (2007) for his coinage of the secular as an immanent frame.

3. This empirical research was conducted in the framework of my PhD project. In this study, I investigate how religious beliefs inform the interpretations, experiences, and practices of Catholic women with regard to love, romantic relationships, and sexuality. In the first phase of data collection, I particularly focused on premarital sexuality, on the importance of a Catholic marriage, and on how religion is a constitutive factor in romantic relationships. Nevertheless, other topics pertaining to (sexual) ethics emerged during the interviews, such as abortion, same-sex sexualities, and contraception. These topics were given much thought by my interlocutors, and were part of deliberation processes as well. The theme 'premarital sexuality' thus emerged within a wider set of negotiations that these women engage in.
4. Pope Francis organised these two synods to address difficulties and solutions concerning the family, marriage, and relationships. In the aftermath of these synods, the main findings were published in the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (see Pope Francis, 2016).
5. All participants' names are pseudonymised to ensure anonymity. Interviews were conducted in Dutch; excerpts were translated into English by the author.
6. Catholic and secular discourses on relationships show more similarities than generally assumed (Huygens, 2020).

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