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Chapter 3

"No prophet is accepted in his own country": Catholic anti-gender activism in Belgium

Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte[1]

Belgium is home to two leading architects of the anti-gender ideology movement (Favier 2014; Paternotte 2015). One of them is Michel Schooyans, a Belgian priest and theologian who is emeritus professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain. Schooyans has been working closely with the Vatican for a long time: He is a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family as well as the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. His 1997 book *L'Evangile face au désordre mondial* (with a foreword by Cardinal Ratzinger) is one of the earliest analyses of the role of the UN in spreading "gender ideology". The second of the pair is Marguerite Peeters. She is a Belgian-American citizen based in Brussels, where she runs a NGO called Dialogue Dynamics on human identity and global governance. She works in the field of international aid, with a special focus on Africa. Close to Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah, she is a consultant at the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Culture. She has published, among other things, the widely translated volume *The Gender Revolution: A Global Agenda: A Tool for Discernment* (2013).

Both thinkers have been instrumental in the development and transnational dissemination of the discourse about "gender ideology". Intriguingly, however, their ideas have failed to find fertile soil in their own country. Even conservative Catholic activists in Belgium hardly know their work and prefer to mobilize against abortion, same-sex adoption, surrogacy or euthanasia – which Schooyans and Peeters consider to be outcomes of "gender ideology" – rather than to oppose the notion of gender itself. Such activist groups, moreover, are few and small, and they are divided along linguistic and ideological lines. Their media coverage is limited, and they are widely ignored in political circles. Belgium's traditionalist Catholics form a marginalized minority within their own Church today, even if they had found a formidable ally in

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Archbishop André Léonard for the past few years. Furthermore, the Belgian Catholic Church as such, while still influential in many ways, is a far cry from the conservative powerhouse it was until the 1960s.

This chapter is an attempt to account for the comparative weakness of anti-gender activism and of Catholic conservatism more generally in Belgium. It begins by attending to a recent event organized by a group of activists trying to turn the tide in their favour,[2] which showcases some of the reasons for this weakness, and proceeds to mapping out Catholic anti-gender activism across the country. The analysis subsequently explores and discusses significant dimensions that might account for the fact that anti-gender activists are less influential in Belgium than they are and have been in other European societies with a strong Catholic influence.

MARCHING FOR THE FAMILY

On 16 May 2015, an organization called Pro Familia organized a "March for the Family" in the city of Antwerp.[3] Some 200 people showed up. Demonstrators blamed the rainy weather for this disappointing turnout. From a podium flanked by large banners with bloody pictures of aborted human fetuses, a series of speakers began addressing the thinly sown crowd. The first was Luc Verreycken from the Rooms-Katholiek Lekenforum (Roman Catholic Lay Forum), a website set up in defence of the former archbishop André Léonard and his hardlining conservatism in all matters sexual. Verreycken spoke out against any political lobbying on behalf of sexual, reproductive and women's rights, but his dissatisfaction was aimed more particularly at abortion. This emphasis on abortion was reiterated in many subsequent interventions. Fernando Pauwels, for example, whose employment at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was discontinued in 2012 for the alleged incompatibility of his religious views with his work as a researcher, declared that a population the size of the city of Ghent had been "wiped out" between the legalization of abortion in 1990 and 2011.

Many of the speakers also appealed to the Belgian clergy not to try and curry the public's favour by softening their tone on conjugal ethics. Doing so would only add to the growing confusion among the faithful, and even among priests who are supposed to counsel them.[4] Several speechmakers lashed out in particular against the Antwerp bishop Johan Bonny, known for being more progressive and for speaking out in favour of a more inclusive Church towards homosexuals and divorced people (Bonny 2014). "We are truly headed for a totalitarian regime," Pro Familia's chair Dries Goethals deplored, tapping into the discourse of a repressed minority as the police

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ordered the removal of the gory anti-abortion banners. Standing up against abortion, for the traditional family, for chastity and for Catholic morals may be difficult in a "May 68 dictatorship", Goethals went on to say, but "we are today's rebels". The righteous few were not to be deterred by the 80,000 people celebrating Gay Pride in Brussels at that very moment.

The small crowd of demonstrators formed a peculiar and oddly contradictory mix. A number of cassock-wearing priests singing psalms gave the march the air of a procession rather than a political manifestation. Vatican banners matched the rich religious sauce that was poured over the entire event, even though this was clearly not to everyone's liking. Several marchers could be heard expressing their discomfort at the "exaggerated" atmosphere of quaint piousness.

More peculiar still were several other flags sticking out of the small crowd. The yellow and white of the Holy See standard contrasted sharply with the red white and blue ensign of tsarist Russia. "It is the last country that still respects traditional values", the teenager holding it told us. A couple of middle-aged demonstrators wearing the militaristic outfits of Russian policemen also raised quite a few eyebrows. And, from a political point of view, the competing presence of both large Belgian flags and many smaller Flemish ones was a strangely incompatible sight. In its immediately recognizable black and yellow version, after all, the Flemish flag is the symbol of militant Flemish nationalism and anti-Belgian resentment. The organizers had apparently asked attendants not to bring politically charged symbols, but, as one Flemish nationalist told us, they had done so anyway to prevent the (French-speaking) "Belgicists" from hijacking the march.

Amid all these ideological insignia, the less familiar blue and pink banners handed out by the organizers, and based on the internationalized template first used for the Manif pour tous in France, looked a little inconspicuous. But the organizers' desire to style their initiative as part of a much broader international movement was quite obvious from the inclusion of several foreign speakers, like Jacek Januzewski from the Polish anti-abortion organization Fundacja Pro or the German Wolfgang Herring from EuroProLife, an activist group whose website proudly boasts members from 15 different European countries, from Portugal to Russia. Directly appealing to the women ("natural mothers") in the crowd was the Englishman Paul Moynan, from the Brussels-based lobbying group CARE for Europe and a councillor at Hope Alive Belgium.[5] And the Belgian section of the largely French Catholic organization Civitas was represented by Tim Neubauer, a Slovene speaking in French. Despite attempts to give the rally an air of internationalism, however, it retained a distinctively Belgian character, marked as it was by elements of linguistic friction and nationalist undertones.

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A STRONGLY MINORIZED MOVEMENT IN FLANDERS

While emblematic for the small and fragmented Catholic anti-gender movement in Belgium as a whole in several ways, the march was particularly representative for this movement in the country's Flemish half. The organization behind it, Pro Familia, consists of a conservative fringe of Flemish Catholic hardliners with ties to the Katholiek Hoogstudentenverbond (Catholic Students' Association). They are frowned upon by many within the Church for their reactionary zeal, as one insider told us, yet they do voice the concerns of the doctrinal minority of Flemish Catholics disgruntled by the Belgian Church's allegedly docile acceptance of liberal ethics concerning marriage, sexuality and procreation. On its website, the Rooms-Katholiek Lekenforum, which is allied with Pro Familia, proclaims that the "deep division" between progressive and dogmatic believers "within the Belgian Church", combined with continued attacks upon "the last traces of the apostolic faith", was the principal reason for the apologetic organization's foundation in 2011.

While distinctly Flemish, these conservative hardliners do reach out across the linguistic border to a certain extent. The Rooms-Katholiek Lekenforum's blog warmly refers to its Francophone counterpart Belgicatho, for example. Aimed at counselling pregnant women, the relief organization Levensadem-Souffle de Vie (Breath of Life) even has a bilingual website and collaborators in both parts of the country (Brébant and Vanderpelen 2015). Most activist groups, however, are linguistically specific and only marginally connected with those on the far side of the linguistic divide. Echte Liefde Wacht (Real Love Waits) and Pro Vita, for example, appear to be chiefly Flemish initiatives, which try to spread their message of premarital abstinence online and in Flanders' many Catholic schools. At the rally, their work was praised by Jeanine Goethals who regularly hosts a programme about conjugal ethics on Radio Maria, a station that broadcasts only in Dutch.[6]

Flemish Catholic conservatism often differs from its Francophone counterpart, because of the former's highly ambiguous historical and political ties to Flemish nationalism. Antwerp being the headquarters of Flemish nationalism, much of the audience who attended the March for the Family was far less attuned to antiquated religious dogmatism than it was to underlying messages criticizing the liberal, multicultural and "Belgicist" establishment. It was easily predictable, therefore, that the most warmly received speech at the March for the Family was the one that dealt with "the congruence of Catholicism and nationalism", delivered by Edwin Truyens, who is the founder of the Nationalistische Studentenvereniging (Nationalist Student Association), from which the leadership of the separatist and xenophobic Far-Right party Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) has emerged. Along with a number of his supporters and NSV members, the party's most radical spokesman, Filip

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Dewinter, was among the demonstrators during the March for the Family. As if to illustrate the all-pervasive importance of language-based subnational identities in Belgian politics, the militant Flemish crowd had to be reminded to remain respectful of "others" when the representative of Civitas Belgique was about to begin his address in French.

Clearly, Flemish Catholic activism is largely the domain of religious and political extremes. Reactionary anti-gender rhetoric does not dovetail very well with contemporary mainstream political ideas, even among Flanders' traditionally conservative-leaning majority. During the march, many passers-by could be seen to shake their heads in disbelief at the reactionary aura of this demonstration. Organizations like Pro Familia are few, and their appeals for a return to Catholic orthodoxy fail to persuade even many on the Far Right in a region where practising worshippers have become a rare breed. As a result, high-profile and politically influential pro-life activists, like Alexandra Colen, are rarer still. And it may be taken as symptomatic that Colen, a Vlaams Belang MP since 1995, resigned from her right-wing party in 2013, disillusioned by its politics and her inability to push her ethical agenda to the fore. Since then, she has resigned from political life entirely, leaving the small and scattered Flemish pro-life movement without a public face.

One cannot understand the Flemish part of the Belgian equation without taking into account its recent religious and political history, and at least two factors must be discussed in order to understand both the weakness and the lack of appeal of conservative Catholic activism. First, since the late 1960s, "old school" authoritarian Catholicism and inflexible Catholic sexual ethics have come to be associated with "Belgicistic" paternalism in the eyes of a substantial and electorally vital part of the Flemish population. The clergy's authoritarianism and its neglect of Flemish demands for cultural autonomy increasingly alienated the Flemish public from its religious leaders. In 1968, student street protests calling for the defrenchification of the Flemish University of Leuven, overseen by a recalcitrant synod of Belgian bishops, toppled the government and definitively set the country on a path towards federalization based on linguistic difference. The reactionary tone of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* issued that summer only served to hasten the collapse of clerical authority in Flanders (Dupont 2014).[7] In addition, between 1967 and 1977, official church attendance figures in Flemish dioceses dropped from 52% to 35.1%. By 1998, it was down to 12.7% and has since continued to fall (Hooghe, Quintelier and Reeskens 2006).

Second, the political debate on the Right has been consumed by the problem of Flemish nationalism for the past few decades, often forcing moral matters onto the background and increasingly depicting them as a form of rearguard action. This is crucial in order to understand the Belgian situation, for Flanders has long delivered the bulk of the votes that kept the

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Christian-Democrats (the former CVP, currently called CD&V) in government almost without interruption from 1947 to 1999.[8] However, the CVP's political hegemony eroded as Flemish nationalist parties on the Right and the Far Right have continued to flourish. The latter are principally concerned with Flemish independence and migration, and to a far lesser extent with moral matters. Moreover, the CVP and subsequent CD&V have dramatically transformed their stance on ethical matters, joining the liberalizing consensus characterizing Flanders today. On ethical issues, its MPs are generally allowed to vote according to their conscience and a large portion of CD&V representatives have endorsed certain ethical reforms like same-sex marriage (Paternotte 2011, 31–33).

The only real political traction these strongly conservative and traditionalist margins have for the moment, Flemish Christian Democrats being unwilling to wager their severely shrunken electoral capital on these issues, is with the Far Right. As said, however, the number-one priority of Vlaams Belang and its electorate lies not so much with ethical issues as it does with Flemish separatism and anti-immigration. Ethical and sexual problems are secondary to the party's core issues and identity, and the series of laws passed by the governments of the early 2000s is primarily portrayed as indicative of the influence wielded by what they feel is the democratically over-represented and left-leaning French-speaking south of the country, in general (where Christian Democrats are a tiny minority, and right-wing parties are virtually absent), and the reviled Francophone socialists, in particular. Moreover, political activists on the Far Right quite happily turn to gender equality and sexual rights to portray Islam as incommensurable with Western "Enlightenment values" (Bracke and De Mul 2009), in a political move which Puar (2007) has called homonationalism.

FRANCOPHONE BELGIUM: ACTIVISTS WITH A FRENCH TOUCH

The Francophone panorama reveals similar weaknesses and divisions, with a constellation of different groups and individuals, which are often connected but do not coalesce in a single organization. The question of nationalism, however, plays out in a very different way. Furthermore, the Catholic pillar has historically been much weaker in that part of the country, which was dominated by humanist forces (socialists in Wallonia and liberals in Brussels) with a strong presence of Free Masons and organized anticlericals. Closely connected to the development of the industrial revolution in the 19th century, secularization started much earlier and Catholic thought lost most of its appeal very early on. Paradoxically, although small in numbers, conservative

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Catholics' views still maintain some traction within the small Christian Democratic Party, which was the only democratic political party to oppose recent laws on ethics.[9] Finally, Far-Right parties have never been strong over the last decades in Francophone Belgium.

The main difference with Flanders, however, lies in the strong French influence on public and intellectual debate. While this is a general feature of Francophone Belgium, it played a key part in the development of a rather limited anti-gender movement. Indeed, as illustrated by the recent opposition to same-sex marriage, conservative Catholic activists were better organized and more influential in France (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Tricou in this volume). Relying on cultural and linguistic proximity, this has inspired Belgian French-speaking activists, who tried to emulate their southern counterparts. Leaders of the Manif pour Tous, like Frigide Barjot, have been invited to Brussels, and a few Belgians organized by Action pour la Famille-Actie voor de Familie (Action for the Family)[10] went to demonstrate in Paris. Some actors like Civitas are even more intimately connected to their French homologues. This group is indeed the Belgian section of a French organization, led by the Belgian activist Alain Escada. The latter was involved in the group Belgique et Chrétienté (Belgium and Christianity) and a board member of the Front nouveau de Belgique before taking the lead of Civitas in France, where his ideas found a more fertile soil (Chatel 2014).

In brief, well-known strongly conservative and traditionalist actors tried to import the debate into Belgium, as they saw it as an opportunity to bolster their activism and to build on the French success. This phenomenon was further reinforced by the fast-growing French population in Belgium and the interest of French activists for Belgian moral politics. As a result, these actors – who had mobilized against abortion, LGBT rights or euthanasia in the past – began to attack gender, to attend events like the conference "Qui a peur du genre?" (Who is afraid of gender?) held by the association Couples et Familles (Couples and Families) in November 2013 in Malonne (De Ganck 2014) and to organize round tables like the one entitled "Parlez-vous le Gender?" (Do you speak gender?) in Brussels that same month.[11] Civitas even protested against Judith Butler's lecture at the Université catholique de Louvain in September 2014. They also tried to reach out to mainstream media, like the historically Catholic newspaper *La Libre Belgique*.[12] A few conservative intellectuals like Drieu Godefridi,[13] Xavier Dijon[14] and Olivier Bonnewijn[15] have also published on the issue. Despite this intense but short-lived attempt to mobilize, these initiatives were rapidly labelled as Catholic, never had much impact on public opinion and failed to find their way into political debates.

Belgium's actors are often poorly connected to the numerous lobbies targeting the European Union and the Council of Europe, which are based in

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Brussels, something also true for conservative politics. There is, however, one notable exception on the Francophone side that deserves mentioning: the Institut européen de bioéthique (European institute for bioethics). This organization is a conservative think tank that is mostly active in French-speaking Belgium, especially with regard to euthanasia. Now led by Carine Brochier, it was established by Etienne Montero, a former dean of the Law Faculty at the Université de Namur who is known to be close to Opus Dei. The Institut européen de bioéthique gathers both Belgian and international actors belonging to the radical fringes of the Catholic Church.[16] It uses the European label to legitimize its discourse and to revitalize its activism.

WHY ARE THEY NOT INFLUENTIAL?

Despite the existence of militant groups and their willingness to mobilize, at present the impact of these mobilizations within Belgium remains limited, on both public debates and legislative agendas. Why? In this section we explore some of the characteristics of Belgian society which, when combined, might account for what we have identified as the paradox of the limited Catholic anti-gender mobilization in the country that has delivered two architects of the anti-gender discourse. We have identified at least three significant factors.

Belgian secular formations

The secular character of Belgian society is shaped by a combination of politico-philosophical principles, legal regulations through which these principles actualized, and a distinct sociocultural reality of organizing confessional and ideological pluralism called pillarization. A key principle in this respect is that of freedom, which is understood as freedom of consciousness, freedom of assembly and freedom of religion. The latter is constitutionally protected through the principle of "freedom of worship" (art. 19 of the Constitution, which also encompasses the freedom of demonstration) and further elaborated in subsequent articles stipulating that nobody can be forced to take part in religious rituals and ceremonies (art. 20) and that the state cannot interfere with the appointment or installation of ministers (art. 21), that is to say, with the concrete organization of worship. At the same time, the Constitution stipulates that the government holds responsibility for the financial support of the physical organization of religious worship (notably salaries for ministers) (art. 181) towards those religious traditions that it officially "recognizes".[17] A second principle shaping secularism in a Belgian context is that of neutrality, which, in contrast to the neighbouring French model, is understood not as a way to eliminate religion from the public sphere nor as an alternative

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to religion but rather as a principle to regulate religious and confessional traditions according to a principle of equality in a pluralist society (Willaime 2010). It is not so much a legal principle, as it is a politico-philosophical one which, more aligned with the neighbouring Dutch model, invokes a particular governmentality of religious traditions that includes, as a matter of principle, financial support of all recognized religions, without interfering with their internal organization (Panafit 1999).[18] In this understanding, one could argue, neutrality is conceived of as the ideal of the state keeping equal distance to the different religious and confessional traditions, that is, to the different pillars.

These legal and philosophical principles need to be considered together with the sociological reality of how the process of secularization occurred in Belgium. Two dimensions characterize this sociological reality, that is the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church and pillarization. Pillarization refers to the organization of various social domains – ranging from civil society, education, health to politics – according to different confessional and ideological lines. In other words, pillarization implies the organization of the social body along confessional or sectarian lines in a segmented polity. A pillar is an integrated complex of societal organizations and/or institutions on a confessional basis, which has a certain internal cohesion that is mirrored in a separation from the rest of society, and which can be recognized as a parallel network or social body (Hoogenboom 1996). Pillarization has famously been described as "a politics of accommodation and pacification" (Lijphart 1968), in which different faiths and ideologies are organized in a structurally similar way. The transformation of a society deeply shaped by Catholicism into a recognizable and delineated Catholic pillar (that stands alongside other confessional and ideological pillars, such as Socialist and Liberal pillars) has been key to the secularization of Belgian society, as well as to its nation formation. Pillarization, in other words, should not be understood as in contradiction to secularization, or as an incomplete form of secularization, but, rather, as Dobbelaere (1988) has argued, pillarization is the particular shape secularization took in Belgian society.

While the legal regulation of freedom of religion has not undergone major changes, the pillarized sociocultural landscape significantly transformed since the 1960s. The pillarized grip over the body politic has loosened considerably, and this has led many commentators to speak of depillarization. Yet it still remains impossible to understand the institutional landscape of today's Belgium outside of the context of pillarization, most notably in the domains of social welfare, health care, trade unions and education. Schools, universities and major hospitals are often still connected to the Catholic, Socialist or Humanist pillar, and those (historical) connections continue to make a difference. Depillarization, hence, does not mean that the confessional and ideological structure of the Belgian institutional landscape has disappeared.

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It has not. It does imply that the tight connections between different institutions in what used to be one pillar have loosened and that individuals move more freely between these different institutions. More particularly, it means that the bonds between the Christian Democratic Political Party and the rest of the Catholic pillar have slackened, thereby weakening either one's influence. While an almost uninterrupted presence of the Christian Democratic Party in Belgian governments long served as the Church's political leverage and guaranteed ability to block moral reforms, this came to an end with the legalization of abortion in 1991, when a law was adopted by a secular parliamentary coalition that relied on the humanist pillar (Marques-Pereira 1989). This political configuration prefigured the ethical reforms that took place during the following decade: a landmark anti-discrimination bill (2003) and the legalization of euthanasia and palliative care (2002), same-sex marriage (2003), stem cell research (2003), human experimentation in medical research (2004), medically assisted fertilization (2006) and adoption by same-sex couples (2006). These reforms were the hallmark of a new ruling coalition excluding the Christian Democratic Party. In 1999, a six-party coalition of both Flemish- and French-speaking Liberals, Socialists and Greens was formed under the leadership of Guy Verhofstadt (Delwit 2009, 257–259), and this was followed by "purple" coalitions (of Socialists and Liberals) from 2004 until 2008. During his two terms as prime minister, Verhofstadt deployed moral issues as symbolic opportunities to establish a difference from many years of Christian Democratic rule. These opportunities, it soon appeared, were most easily found in the "ethical" domain, where Christian Democrats had long blocked progressive reforms (Meier 2009; Eeckhout and Paternotte 2011).

Depillarization, in sum, refers to the disarticulation of different spheres of life that were traditionally held together within one pillar and hence implies a gradual undoing of the segmented organization of the body politic in Belgium. Because the Catholic pillar was historically the most powerful one by far, the process of depillarization has first and foremost amounted to a loss of power by the Catholic Church. Yet this is a different kind of power loss than the one the Church has suffered in the French model of neutrality. As depillarization does not imply that the public polity is all of a sudden cleared from the confessional fault lines that were present at the very formation of the Belgian nation state, the Catholic Church in Belgium continues to have its recognized place from where it can wield a certain kind of public influence, within the limitative contours drawn by the state. While a process of de-churching has significantly reduced (in numbers) and transformed (in form) the religious affiliation and expressions within that domain, a sociocultural Catholic world has continued to develop in a way that was not the case in the contrasting example of France. While the discourse of "marginalization" and of "being

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besieged by secular culture" has been consistently present, this sociocultural Catholic world was able to exist and flourish within the (constitutionally delineated) contours of a space that by various sociological parameters can be described as important and influential within society at large. This might lead us to hypothesize that the avowed space for a Catholic religious and sociocultural world in the Belgian public sphere has inhibited, or at least delayed, the dramatic rise of anti-gender activism in the contrasting example of France, where this activism was marked by a "return of the repressed" sentiment that loses much of its sense in the Belgian context.

The Belgian Catholic Church

This political economy of secularization (pillarization–depillarization) shaped the Catholic Church in Belgium in particular ways, just as the Church impacted on the shape secularization took in Belgium. Perhaps connected to the way in which pillarization guaranteed the Church its own space that did not require constant defence, the Church in Belgium is characterized by strong divisions, with key clergymen taking various positions with regard to important ethical issues. In fact, for almost half a century the Belgian Church has been led by two long-serving archbishops who held, at least from a Catholic perspective, distinctly progressive views towards several of those issues, particularly insofar as conjugal ethics were concerned. Appointed by his good friend Pope John XXIII, Leo Suenens has often been cited as the principal champion of the fight against *Humanae vitae* during the 1960s and 1970s. Although perceived as an authoritarian conservative at home due to his stance against the demands for autonomy by Flemish students at the Catholic University, the Vatican considered Suenens and his bystanders as renegade advocates for integrating the responsible use of birth control measures in Catholic doctrine (Dupont 2014).

Suenens' successor, Godfried Danneels, who took over as archbishop of Malines-Brussels in 1980, had witnessed the damage done by Paul VI's forbidding encyclical. The 30 years of his own episcopacy were to be marked by the effort not to antagonize what was left of the crumbling Catholic community, but to tread carefully and speak ecumenically, something that earned him the respect of the public and policymakers alike (Mettepenningen and Schelkens 2015). Many of John Paul II's following as well as his more conservative opponents at home scorned at Danneels' caution, blaming him for the runaway disintegration of the Belgian Church in general and for not speaking out more forcefully against the legalization of abortion in 1990 and the legislative agenda of the "purple" governments in particular. Indeed, if the Church officially condemned these reforms, it did not lead the opposition nor mounted campaigns against them. Most bishops were extremely careful in voicing their dissent.

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In an attempt to shift the tone of the Belgian clerical leadership, Pope Benedict XVI appointed André Léonard as the country's new primate in 2010. Unlike Danneels before him, perfectly bilingual and ubiquitous in the press from the outset, Léonard had no qualms in publicly condemning abortion, homosexuality and euthanasia. Mere months after his consecration he joined a March for Life against abortion in Brussels, and he attended it again the following year. Already in 2007, Léonard had relied upon Freudian-sounding terminology to call homosexuality a form of abnormal development, a position he never distanced himself from. And during his resigning homily at the 2015 Easter Mass, he used the 25th anniversary of the abortion law to recall that children are murdered in Belgium without the protection of the law (Brébant and Vanderpelen 2015).

Having been the bishop of Namur prior to his appointment as archbishop, Léonard's outspoken and widely reported opinions were a great stimulus for Catholic conservatives in French-speaking Belgium. A Flemish blogger deplored that the "abortion and Pro-Life movement is more alive in the French-speaking part of the country," because of Léonard.[19] Both as bishop and as the Belgian primate, Léonard fostered the implantation of the most conservative wings of the Catholic Church as part of his efforts towards a "New Evangelization". He thoroughly reorganized the education of priests and facilitated the establishment of two seminars *Redemptoris Mater*, which follow the rules of the Neocatechumenal Way. He also supported the development of "new communities" such as the Communauté de l'Emmanuel and the Communauté des Béatitudes, among others, on the campus of the Université catholique de Louvain. International research has shown that these groups were often the most active in mobilizations against gender (Arcq and Sägesser 2011).

Yet Léonard has also been harshly criticized within the Church, ever since his appointment as bishop of Namur (Arcq and Blaise 1991). In the final analysis, Léonard's obstinacy and illiberalism seems to have primarily succeeded in strengthening many people's conviction, both inside and outside the Church, that the Catholicism he represents is out of touch with the modern world. Especially at a time when one child sex abuse scandal after another has come to light, and the Church has failed to respond in a way that might have toned down public outrage at clear signs that such scandals had been covered up by the clerical hierarchy for decades, whatever legitimacy the Church still retained in matters of sexual morality has evaporated further. Turning 75, Léonard has submitted his resignation to the pope in the spring of 2015, and he was recently replaced by Bishop Joseph De Kesel, who is considered Mgr Danneels' direct heir. In sum, conservative and traditionalist positions, particularly in relation to sexuality and bioethics, are entrenched with the Belgian Catholic Church, yet there has been significant space for

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more progressive positions to develop. The current anti-gender positions that are present within the Church have, so far, not managed to become hegemonic within the sociocultural Catholic world, not even during the brief time when one of the representatives of the more conservative and traditionalist positions was appointed archbishop.

The timing of ethical reforms

Last but not least, it is worth pausing to consider the role of timing in relation to the crucial ethical reforms of the early 2000s, the intra-Church dynamics and responses (with notably the appointment of Léonard as archbishop in 2010) and the transnational emergence and visibility of anti-gender mobilizations. Indeed, Belgium became a forerunner in progressive moral politics at the start of the millennium, and both same-sex marriage and adoption, which served as catalysts for conservative activism and fuelled the gender debate in many countries, had already been adopted before the start of the anti-gender offensive internationally. The gap between the timing of reform in Belgium and the one of the international offensive against "gender ideology" might also help to explain the weak opposition to recent reforms by the Belgian Catholic Church.

More recently, when debates on same-sex marriage took place in France and the concept of gender entered the public debate in that country, Belgians were celebrating the tenth anniversary of same-sex marriage. As Belgium was the second country to do so worldwide, this law soon became a source of national pride, which became part of various homonationalist tendencies. Because of this, it was difficult for most Belgians to understand the causes of the strong oppositional movement in France.[20] In addition, as far as anti-gender mobilizations were associated with the French Manif pour Tous, public opinion was even more reluctant to support anti-gender arguments.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that, at the time of writing, Catholic anti-gender mobilizations have not been influential in Belgium. Conservative and traditionalist Catholic groups lack the militancy, the organizational skills, the ecclesiastical support and the sheer scale of the mobilizations we have seen elsewhere. Crucially, this does not imply the absence of resistance to gender in this country but rather that the focus of this chapter does not allow us to capture the whole picture. Indeed, the opposition to gender as an analytical category, and the re-essentialization of sex – designated by Bracke as "gender lite" (2014)[21] – can be observed in different sectors of Belgian society. Re-essentialized notions

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of gender are by no means the prerogative of conservative strands within the Catholic Church, but also of similar strands within other religious traditions in Belgium, notably Evangelical Protestantism and Islam. They are, moreover, not the prerogative of religious traditions. Resistance against gender can equally be found in secular modes of knowledge production that dispute the use of gender as a category of analysis and other insights as they have been developed within gender studies. This resistance encompasses (but is not limited to) strands of evolutionary psychology, which happens to be relatively strong in Belgium, or positivist social scientific approaches that shun the constructed as well as performative dimensions of social reality.

The influence of these types of knowledge production might be linked to a particular trait of the public debate in Belgium, and in particular in Flanders, that is its anti-intellectualist character, which easily dismisses accounts that draw attention to how social reality comes into being. This is, moreover, exacerbated by a neoliberal hegemony in which analyses in terms of power relations are, to say the least, unpopular.

All this is illustrated by the comparative lack of institutionalized gender studies in Belgium. The development and institutionalization of gender studies as an internationally recognized interdisciplinary field of studies has been painstakingly slow in the country and significantly lags behind the institutionalization of this scholarly field of inquiry in neighbouring countries. This is the case despite a sustained struggle for the introduction, promotion and institutionalization of gender studies in the Belgian academy. It highlights the institutional resistance against a strong, analytical notion of gender and allows gender critiques such as polemist Drieu Godefridi to deliver a lecture entitled "Gender: Science or Ideology?" at the Francophone Académie royale de Belgique. This event, which took place in March 2016, sparked reactions from numerous scholars in Belgium, but the Académie preferred not to reply to their concerns.

In sum, one may wonder whether anti-gender mobilizations in the street might be less urgent in Belgium, as various kinds of cultural and institutional resistances against a strong analytical notion of gender are operative. Clearly, these various dimensions and factors deserve a more in-depth in analysis that falls beyond the scope of this chapter.

NOTES

1. We thank Cécile Vanderpelen, Caroline Sägesser, Mieke Verloo and Roman Kuhar for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter.

2. The fieldwork was done by Wannes Dupont.

3. This was not the first time this label is used for a demonstration in Belgium, as illustrated by the main demonstration against same-sex adoption in 2005 (Herbrand 2006, 57–58). Recent years have also seen a rebirth of anti-abortion activism, with

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pro-life marches organized every year in Brussels since 2010 (Pereira 2014; Brébant and Vanderpelen 2015). These marches often involve the same individuals, and one can observe numerous intersections between these different struggles.

4. Such a comment invokes the well-documented tendency (see, e.g., Ammerman 1994) that, within the stricter or more conservative corners of various religious traditions, liberal or "modern" influences within the religious tradition are perceived as more dangerous or threatening than criticism from outside the tradition. A clear illustration of this view can be found in a post (9 January 2016, on euthanasia) on the website of the already mentioned Rooms-Katholieke Lekenforum: "What Is More Dangerous for the Survival of Our Church? The attacks by atheists and rabid anticlericals or the confusion induced by members of the intelligentsia or the clerics who propagate, through their words and deeds, a Catholicism of their own making? In our opinion the internal subversion of the catholic faith is by far the most detrimental" (www.katholiekforum.be/. Accessed 7 May 2016; our translation).

5. CARE stands for Christian Action Research and Education.

6. Radio Maria is connected with the international network of Radio Maria stations. See http://www.radiomaria.org. Accessed 5 January 2016.

7. Meanwhile, in Francophone Belgium the eventual separation of the French- and Dutch-speaking universities of Leuven also struck a serious blow to the authority of the synod of bishops for their failure to prevent this from happening.

8. Christian Democrats were only out of office between 1954 and 1958. The anticlerical cabinets of these years were fundamentally challenged by massive Catholic mobilization against the secularization of schools that lasted for years and ended with an election that swept Christian Democrats back into power for another 40 years.

9. A more radical Christian party, Chrétiens démocrates fédéraux (CDF), existed from 2002 until 2013 but never reached parliamentary institutions.

10. Chaired by Michel Ghins, an emeritus philosophy professor at the Université catholique de Louvain, Action pour la Famille-Actie voor het Gezin was the main civil society group opposing same-sex adoption in 2005–2006, organizing the March for the Family held in 2005 with the official support of Belgian bishops. It claims transnational connections with the Institute for Family Policies (IFP), the Foro Español de la Familia (FEF), HazteOir, the Federation of Catholic Families (FAFCE) and CARE in Europe. This group remains active and operates as a watchdog in family policy matters, calling its members to participate to the Marches for Life and currently mobilizing against surrogacy.

11. Speakers included Marguerite Peeters, Maria Hildingsson (FAFCE), Elizabeth Montfort, Jérôme Brunet and Jean-Thomas Lesueur.

12. Casterman et al. (2013) (that is just after the conference "Qui a peur du genre?"). In January 2014, the public radio La Première organized a debate on the "gender battle" in its show "Et Dieu dans tout ça?". Catholic media also mobilized on the issue (Grandjean 2014).

13. Drieu Godefridi is the founder of the Brussels von Hayek's Institute and a well-known polemist in Belgian media. He is also involved in activism against euthanasia. On this topic, he published two books (2013, 2015). He also took part in a debate entitled "Gender Theory: When Dad Wears a Dress" with Sophie Heine in *La Libre Belgique* in September 2015.

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14. Father Xavier Dijon is a Jesuit and an emeritus professor at the Université de Namur. He has been a member of the Conseil consultatif de bioéthique and has published various articles on the topics of gender and sex complementarity (see Dijon 2015).

15. Father Olivier Bonnewijn is a member of the Communauté de l'Emmanuel. Episcopal Vicar to the formation of the ordained and non-ordained ministries, he teaches at the Institut d'études théologiques de Bruxelles and has been the head of the seminar of the Archdiocese of Malines-Brussels since 2009. On gender, he is the author of the chapter "Gender, qui es-tu?" (2012).

16. Like (former) MEP Elizabeth Montfort, Anna Zaborska and Miroslav Mikolasik, Prince Nikolaus von Liechtenstein, Action pour la famille's leader Professor Michel Ghins, French Catholic activist Pierre-Olivier Arduin, the Fondation Jérôme Lejeune's head Jean-Marie Le Méné, Dr Xavier Mirabel, McGill Professor Margaret Somerville or Father Xavier Dijon.

17. At present, "recognized religions" include Catholicism, Protestantism, Anglicanism, Judaism, Islam, Eastern Orthodox Church, but also Secular Humanism (recognized as "non-confessional philosophical communities", since 2002) and Buddhism (since 2008).

18. This way of organizing religious traditions in the public sphere does of course not escape the operations of governmentality but revolves around it. This perhaps becomes most clear in the case of Islam, where its official recognition (in 1974) and inclusion in this particular way of organizing "Church-State relations" depended on the degree to which the religious tradition could be made to fit the existing format of the Belgian model and makes visible the extent to which the model understands religion organized along the lines of the Roman Catholic Church (a clear hierarchy with leaders who become the state's dialogue partners) (Fadil et al. 2015).

19. http://kavlaanderen.blogspot.be/2013/06/de-volgende-mars-voor-het-leven-in.html. Accessed 24 January 2016.

20. Some even believed they had to support French same-sex proponents. They organized an action against Frigide Barjot, the spokeswoman of the Manif pour Tous, when she came to Brussels and demonstrated in front of the venue where she was giving a talk. They also urged Belgians to demonstrate in Paris. Interestingly, many of them went to the French capital with Belgian flags, which are very rarely used in Belgium.

21. Bracke (2014) refers to the widespread usage of a weak understanding of gender, a notion of gender that fails to fully consider the constructed character of gender nor the asymmetrical power relation at its heart. As a result, such uses of gender tend to re-essentialize gender and gender is effectively used to speak of men and women, that is as synonymous for biological sex.

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