The Role of Religious Certainty and Uncertainty in Moral Orientation in a Catholic Province in the Netherlands

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In the post-secularization debates about the role of religion in contemporary European societies, social scientists and philosophers often build on (speculative) sociological theories as to whether the conditions of life in (high) modernity produce existential insecurities that give rise to a need for a particular kind of religiosity. This religiosity is seen as rooted in the only things that still seem to provide some basis for certainty: experience and the self. In this article the author argues that a focus on processes of signification reveals that both religious certainty and religious uncertainty can be a strong source for moral orientation in contemporary Limburg (in the Netherlands), but does not necessarily lead to a stronger emphasis on experience and the self. Fundamental to this argument is Jackson’s insight into practices of signification as a ceaseless negotiation of the boundary between two domains: the domain considered to be susceptible to human control, and the domain outside human control.

Key words: Catholicism · post-secularization · Limburg · practices of signification · moral orientation · Netherlands

Au sein des débats de la post-sécularisation portant sur le rôle de la religion dans les sociétés européennes contemporaines, les sociologues et les philosophes ont souvent élaboré des théories (spéculatives) à propos des conditions de production, par la (haute) modernité, d’insécurité existentielle qui fait naître un besoin particulier de religiosité. Celle-ci est considérée comme enracinée dans les quelques aspects qui semblent encore fournir des bases pour la certitude: l’expérience et le moi. Dans cet article, l’auteure avance que l’analyse de processus de sens révèle que la certitude, autant que l’incertitude religieuse, peuvent constituer des sources fortes d’orientation morale dans le Limbourg contemporain (aux Pays-Bas), mais ne provoquent pas nécessairement un renforcement de l’expérience et du moi. Pour appuyer cette argumentation, les thèses de Jackson sur les pratiques de sens ont été utilisées. Ces pratiques sont considérées comme une négociation incessante de frontières entre deux domaines: celui qui est susceptible d’être soumis au contrôle humain et celui qui y échappe.

Mots-clés: catholicisme · post-sécularisation · Limbourg · pratiques de sens · orientation morale · Pays-Bas

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Introduction

The last decade or so has seen many attempts to redefine the field of study of religion in contemporary European societies. It was long dominated by the secularization thesis, yet now there are few people who still argue that religion is bound to disappear completely. Hervieu-Léger has summarized the failings of the secularization thesis:

The theory of secularization as an exiting from religion is entirely valid if it is applied within a religious genealogy of the autonomization of politics and of the individual in modern societies. From the viewpoint of a sociology of believing, it constitutes a local and limited theory of the deinstitutionalizing of religion. But it is altogether powerless to furnish the basis of a theory of the relationship between religion and culture in western societies (Hervieu-Léger, 2001: 120).

In the classical secularization theories (such as formulated by Peter Berger in his influential book The Sacred Canopy) differentiation is seen as causing loss of plausibility in religion—different life worlds emerge and therefore it becomes part of everyday consciousness that different ways of life and valuation are possible. However, it seems social scientists and philosophers now see the process of modernization as producing the need for religion, or rather, a particular kind of religiosity rooted in experience and the self.

In my study of present-day religious practices in Limburg I distinguish two main directions in these attempts to redefine the field: (1) the limits of disenchantment and differentiation caused by rationalization, and (2) the significance of individualization (as the dominant mode of structuring societies, redefining the place of religion in social life) and individualism (as a complex of cultural values and beliefs) (Knibbe, 2007: 5). The first direction is suggested by authors such as Van Harskamp and Hervieu-Léger, but also by Bauman: perhaps the rationalism that has driven modernization has exhausted itself and runs into the contradiction that although it undermines all attempts to formulate ultimate answers, it cannot give ultimate answers itself (Bauman, 1998; Van Harskamp, 2000; Hervieu-Léger, 1990). The second direction is suggested by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim in their work on individualization and detraditionalization, and elaborated on by Van Harskamp, Heelas and Woodhead (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 7; Heelas, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2001; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Van Harskamp, 2000: ch. 2). This seems to be borne out by statistical research showing a correlation between individualism and a certain type of religious beliefs centred on experience and the self (e.g. Halman, Heunks et al., 1987; Houtman and Mascini, 2002).

However, in my research in local communities in Limburg I found that an individualist ethos was not very strong, nor was there a strong tendency to look towards experience or the self as an anchor of (religious) certainty. Although people had a strong wish to protect their familiar world against interference from unfamiliar authorities, this should not be confused with individualism. Values were strongly relational, traditional gender-roles only slightly modified and continuity with the immediate past of family and place informed many decisions on how to raise the next generation (Knibbe, 2007).
In this article I argue that it is not necessarily certainty that is needed to alleviate anxieties about the world and one’s place in it, about good and right, about the ultimate questions. In this I follow Jackson’s fundamental insight into practices of signification:

...[I]n every human society concepts such as fate, history, evolution, God, chance, and even the weather signify forces of otherness that one cannot fully fathom and over which one can expect to exercise little or no ultimate control. These forces are given; they are in the nature of things. In spite of this, human beings countermand and transform these forces by dint of their imagination and will so that, in every society, it is possible to outline a domain of action and understanding in which people expect to be able to grasp, manipulate, and master their own fate (Jackson, 1998: 19).

According to Jackson, constitutive to all human action is the balancing between the domains one can control and those one cannot control, and the negotiation of the boundaries between those domains (Jackson, 1998: 21). Logically, it follows that knowledge and authority play a major role in this negotiation: to be able to decide what is within or outside one’s control one needs knowledge about the world, its nature and the way it works, the limits of human action and power, and the extent of the power of other people, institutions and Gods.

In the following I will first go into the history of the way in which the Catholic Church has attempted to draw these boundaries by emphasizing authority and dogma and by erecting the Catholic pillar, and then examine how these boundaries were redrawn from within this pillar. In the second part I will show how these boundaries are negotiated in a discussion between participants and pastor during a study group in which I participated, and how this informs moral reasoning. The analysis of the pillarization of Catholicism in Limburg draws on several historical studies, notably Nissen and Ubachs (Nissen, 1996; 2000; Ubachs, 2000), while the last part of this article is based on my own fieldwork in Limburg in 2001/2002 (Knibbe, 2007).

Pillarization and liberation

The explicit aim of the Church, from the mid-19th century until the late 1950s, was to keep people safe from the dangers of modernity. At first, the strategy of the church was aimed at consolidating eternal certainties, circumscribing them more exactly and putting them into language that condemned all doubt as sin, and concentrated authority in the pope and the church hierarchy. Many of the 19th-century papal pronouncements can be seen in this light: the declaration of the dogmas of the infallibility of the pope (1870), the virginity of Mary and her immaculate conception (1854), the promotion of devotions and a new emphasis on the Eucharist and confession. When this was not enough, the social organization of the Catholic flock of believers was taken in hand to prevent them from being contaminated by alien ideas and lapsing from Catholic practice. The control of knowledge was central in this effort and the efforts of the clergy therefore focused on schools, libraries and leisure activities. Within these Catholic
organizations and schools, everything was directed towards protecting the Catholicism of believers, and it was apparently very successful, pushing up the birth rate (Knippenberg, 1992: 171). In 1953, the centennial of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the Netherlands, some authorities even expressed the hope that Catholics would soon make up more than half of the Dutch population.

Nevertheless, at this time the united front of Dutch Catholicism was already strained from within. Lay intellectual Catholics and young clergy influenced by the “nouvelle théologie” from France played an important role in this (cf. Simons and Winkeler, 1987; Westhoff, 1996; Coleman, 1978). The war had promoted cooperation between believers of different faiths, and after the war there were those who believed that a breakthrough between the pillars was desirable. In reaction to this, the Dutch bishops issued an Episcopal letter in 1954, emphasizing again that Catholics should in all things be Catholic, follow the guidance of their betters (i.e. priests) and avoid contact with representatives of other denominations and ideologies. These admonishments were backed up by the strategy of exclusion from the sacraments, central to Catholic religious practice:

We enforce the rule that the Holy Sacraments should be refused to the Catholic—who if he dies unrepentant must be refused a Catholic burial—of whom it is known that he is a member of the Socialist Party, or that he, without being a member, still regularly reads socialist writings or magazines or attends socialist meetings. (Episcopal letter 1954—my translation)

It is significant (but not surprising to those who know the history of the Catholic Church) that reading the wrong type of literature was as grave a sin as being a member of a socialist group. However, Catholics continued to listen to socialist radio, and cooperation between organizations of the different pillars became increasingly common. Meanwhile Catholic intellectuals were more and more convinced that fear was not the right basis for belief, and tried to change their church accordingly. The relaxation of the rules around birth control was one of the central issues through which this theological liberalism was eventually popularized and took root among the majority of Catholics in the Netherlands (Westhoff, 1996).

Limburg is an exception in the Netherlands, historically dominated by Protestants because of its homogeneously Catholic population. The diocese of Roermond, geographically equivalent to the present-day province of Limburg, was formed at the reinstatement of the church hierarchy in the Netherlands in 1853. The church in Limburg has from the 19th century onwards been characterized by a strong ultramontanism (in contrast to the church in nearby Liege for example) (Ubachs, 2000: 390). This ideology took Rome and the pope as its centre, and although it accepted the separation between church and state, it saw the church as not subservient to the state, and resisted any interference from the state in church affairs. It was also explicitly anti-modern, and feared the influence of both liberalism and Marxism. When socialism became a real threat, and secularization among labourers became apparent, the church felt compelled to act on the situation. With the help of the upper class in Limburg, organizations were set up to
provide the lower classes with everything they needed, literally from the cradle to the grave. This way, the church gained a grip on the newly emerging social order. The goal of these organizations was not the emancipation of the labourers, but to remedy a perceived lack of moral leadership.

The fear of socialism thus gave rise to a strongly organized Catholic pillar, dictating the rhythm to which people lived. In the 1920s, after financial equality between public and “special” (i.e. religious) education had been guaranteed by law, all public schools in Limburg were brought under the control of the Catholic Church, compelling all children to attend mass before school. The percentage of “secular priests” (as opposed to priests belonging to a congregation or monastic order) was very high in Limburg, higher than in the other provinces. By the 1950s the Catholic Church in Limburg had managed to make itself omnipresent in people’s lives. The Catholic pillar was not just one of the pillars of Dutch society, it was society itself; the percentage of Protestants and socialists was negligible in this province. Local communities in Limburg truly were “Catholic in everything”. Some historians describe Limburg as a veritable “clerocracy” (Nissen, 2000: 86).

After the 1950s, this clerocracy in Limburg crumbled. Under Moors, who became bishop in 1959, young critics of the church were given a chance to “modernize” the organization of the diocese. These critics were influenced by the discourses of modern Catholic intellectuals, as in the rest of the Netherlands. Their aim was to reorganize parish life in keeping with ideas of democratization and the importance of the personal conscience of people. Their main criticism was that the “old style” of believing relied on inspiring fear of God rather than emphasizing his love. In their eyes, the church should be reorganized in such a way as to inspire people to live according to Catholic doctrine out of their own free will and personal conscience, rather than out of fear of punishment through exclusion from the sacraments and ultimately, hell (see for example Huijts, 1960). Of course, this was reinforced by the call of Pope John XXIII for an aggiornamento in the Church.

Meanwhile, in Limburg as in the rest of the Netherlands, the pillarized organizations were co-opted by the welfare state, and the influence of the priests on these organizations steadily became less, or at least different, as they implemented their own democratic ideals. The number of callings dropped dramatically, and at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s many priests left the priesthood. The rising level of education and general professionalization in schools and hospitals, municipal councils and even in church affairs meant that priests lost much of their standing as well as their authority over the moral life of members of Limburg society. In the words of Hellemans: “they [professionals] no longer oriented themselves towards the moral-religious standards of the church, but referred to the criteria of their profession that transcended the boundaries of the Catholic pillar” (Hellemans, 1988: 49—my translation).

In 1972, the conservative priest and church historian Gijsen was installed as the successor of Moors through a controversial surprise appointment by Rome. Johannes Gijsen was known for his outspoken conservative views on the role and morality of the church. Gijsen’s agenda was to push the
paradigm of the church as a sacred institution, with the ordained priest as the central figure for the administration of the sacraments to lay believers. Gijsen saw the sacraments as the framework for an unchanging moral order propagated by an eternal church, going against the historical critical attitude towards the Bible and the Christian tradition as developed by liberal theologians such as Schillebeeckx, Rahner and Küng. His attitude was “love it or leave it”, something that went directly against the conviction that had grown among progressive Catholics, expressed forcefully during the pastoral council in Noordwijkerhout (1966–1970), that “the people are the church”. Gijsen, however, referred back to the strong tradition of ultramontanism of Limburg: Rome is the church.

Realities on the ground resisted Gijsen’s agenda. Most priests and pastoral workers in Limburg, and many of the orders and congregations working in the organizations left over from the pillarization, had become steeped in the ideal of the people are the church. Among the clergy and pastoral workers, a strong polarization developed between Gijsen’s neoconservative priests (he set up his own seminary to produce priests who would be loyal to his policies) and more liberal practising Catholics. During my fieldwork the people at the level of local communities (by far not all practising Catholics) refer to Gijsen’s time as a period of folly, the attempt of one ill-chosen fanatic and his cronies to turn back the clock. The modern ideal of progress is firmly embedded in the way of thinking and in the eyes of most people; this meant that rather than teach people to know their place, the church should know its own place (see also Wijnen and Koopmanschap, 1981).

In 1993, Gijsen was replaced\(^1\) by Wiertz (who is still the bishop of Roermond at the time of writing), who seems to promote cooperation with the more progressive factions and a respectful involvement of lay believers, while at the same time adhering to a policy dictated by Rome. In this policy, the proper administration of the sacraments and the special status of the ordained priest is again a central issue. Although the polarization has lost its sharp edges, it is clear that the forces of renewal have been contained within the paradigm of the hierarchical church as a sacred institution.

### From Institutional Realities to Local Realities

Among lay believers in Limburg, the return to eternal certainties promoted officially by the diocese since Gijsen’s appointment is felt as implausible. In village life and in the private life of people, the neo-conservative turn has rather led to a distancing between the church and believers.

When I started fieldwork for my research on religious change in Limburg, I was immediately directed away from the local parish church, where a conservative priest appointed by Gijsen held sway, to a nearby pastoral centre. In this pastoral centre, people said, the pastors and priests had “gone along with the times”, whereas the local priest had made himself impossible by trying to turn back the clock. Most people agreed that although the church had a certain ritual function in village life, when it came to moral
orientation and reflecting on worldview matters they were wary of interference from the church. The pastoral centre took this attitude into account, implicitly deviating from diocesan policy to develop unofficial practices to fit the local context (cf Knibbe, 2007; Watling, 2001).

This pastoral centre, which can be classified as belonging to the progressive wing of Catholicism, emphasized the fundamental uncertainty of belief rather than the certainties of Catholicism that the older generation in Limburg had been taught to believe in. By emphasizing the uncertainty of belief, they seemed to adjust to the claims of science on reality and truth, while also reacting against the dogmatic and stifling hierarchical pre-Vatican II church that had tried to outlaw all uncertainties in a reaction against secularism.

Most of the people who attend the meetings, workshops and lectures of this group are from the surrounding villages and therefore share in the vivid collective memories of a hierarchical church that used to mete out punishment to anyone who dared to question eternal certainties, or who deviated from the straight and narrow as defined by it. Moreover, through participating in village life they are often confronted by a conservative priest, appointed by Gijsen or even Wiertz, upholding a Rome-centred dogmatic view of Catholicism. Below, I want to discuss in more detail the role of knowledge and certainty in negotiating the boundaries between the domain of action and the domain of “fate” “God”, etc. and how this informs moral reasoning.

The pastoral centre offers individual counselling, courses and discussion groups on the Bible or other religious topics. The courses involve training lay persons from the surrounding parishes to lead family services and wake services for the bereaved held the night before burial, and to help in the pastorate for elderly people. Some of these laypersons have no prior training at all; others are already familiar with the discourse of the centre. The discussion groups are mixed as well: some people have been coming to the centre for years, others have joined recently.

It was during the meetings of one discussion group that the play of religious certainties and uncertainties was particularly highlighted. Throughout these meetings, a confrontation took place between one participant and the accepted discourse of the pastoral centre. In two meetings, texts from the Bible that told of specific events around Moses, Isaac, Joseph and Jesus were compared to texts in the Quran that discussed more or less the same events. The participants were mostly women, and one man who was accompanying his wife. During the two sessions, this man kept asking questions that the pastor and the other participants found awkward and disturbing: he would always try to clear up the literal details of the story. For example, he would ask whether Abraham took Ishmael or Isaac to sacrifice when God asked him to bring his “most beloved son” (in the Quran it is Ishmael, in the Bible it is Isaac). Each time he asked a question like this, he was corrected by the pastor and by the other participants: “It’s not in those details; it’s about the message of the story”. In this case, it would be the message that God does not demand human sacrifices, even though Abraham expected him to demand this because perhaps it was normal in other religions at the time. Or, when something miraculous happened, he asked “Does that mean that
it is historically proven that God actually did those things?" Patiently, the pastor explained that:

there are always two layers in language, in a story: the factual, and the symbolical. Like when you say you feel “butterflies in your stomach”, you don’t literally have butterflies in your stomach, do you? Otherwise you would have to undergo an operation. These stories are not a literal account of what happened, but you could read them as a historical account, or as an account of how people believed, how they put their trust in God.

However, this man kept being distracted by the question of “what really happened”. And despite his respect for his wife’s intelligence, it did not sit well with him: if it did not really happen, what is the value of these stories? Did they lie to us all those years ago? We had exams on this!

The other participants and the pastor tried to cool these indignant outbursts of confusion. To the pastor and to the participants who had been coming to the centre more often these were questions that they had come to terms with at an earlier stage. On this occasion, as on other occasions, the same clarifications and ways of coping were presented to the person afflicted by this kind of shock: of course, most priests were not intentionally misleading the people, they also used to believe all this. Some priests believe it even now. “But what does this have to do with you?” the pastor asked rhetorically. “Why bother with what other people thought or still think, isn’t it better to focus on developing your own insight of what you think is true and right, and see what kind of comfort you can draw from the stories of the Bible?”

The pastor and the other participants expected the man to get past that stage, and see those priests and Catholics who are, in their eyes, not able to get past that stage as somehow impaired in their development, unable to cope with uncertainty and the precariousness of faith. This evolution from certainty to uncertainty was also projected onto Islam: one person, commenting on the current prominence of fundamentalism in Islam, suspected that this was because “they” “still took the Quran too literally”, thereby suggesting that it would only be a matter of time before “they” would also progress to an acceptable, modern, less literal interpretation of their holy book. Most participants accepted this reassuring assessment. An emphasis on religious certainty is considered outdated, even a bit distasteful.

In the pastoral centre, uncertainty about the existence of God, the precariousness of faith and the impossibility of coming up with one “correct” interpretation of the Bible is actually seen as a moral good. Certainty, to them, is a dangerous psychological prop that will ultimately lead to fundamentalism and attempts to lay down the law for other people in ways that are incompatible with the democratic egalitarian spirit that they see reflected in the life and teachings of Jesus. In the Bible discussion group for example, the pastor would often emphasize that maybe we (Christians) are lucky to have four gospels that are so often contradictory. Because that means that no one can claim to be the ultimate authority on religious matters.

This uncertainty is invoked as a medicine against the “burden of the past” of the Catholic Church, a burden that still informs how people in the local communities relate to religious authority (Knibbe, 2007: 101). The attempt
to safeguard its flock from the corrosive effects of modernity is now generally regarded as having caused a lot of psychological damage, especially through its obsessive control of people’s sexual life and the suppression of independent, creative thought. Rather than emphasizing dogmas certified by the pope, belief in God is sometimes conceptualized as a personal loss, or a relinquishing of control, an admission that one does not know, that nobody can fully know God. To believe, then, means to admit that one does not know everything, or understand the reason of suffering, but still to put one’s trust in God.

The pastors often emphasized that one should not pray to God as someone who will do what you want: praying does not change the situation, but it changes the person in the situation. In the discourse of the pastoral centre then, existential dilemmas, disruptive life experiences are given into the care of God, placed in the domain of things one cannot control. Attempting to control them, and attempting to gain certainty about that which is greater than you, is seen as psychologically regressive (which is practically synonymous with bad). Nevertheless, by studying the Bible, learning from the tradition of wise people exemplified in Christianity and praying to God, one can learn to take life as it comes and act according to the spirit of love as shown by Jesus.

Discussion

In this article I have shown how both religious certainty and religious uncertainty can be a source for moral orientation. Whereas the Catholic pillar and the neoconservative policy of the Roermond diocese emphasize certainty as a source for morality, the “liberal” theology of the pastoral centre draws on uncertainty as a source for moral values, moral values that are much closer to the relationally embedded ethic of caring people that the people in the local communities in Limburg want to promote (Knibbe, 2007).

This can be understood by returning to Jackson’s fundamental insight into practices of signification: for existential security the important thing is not so much to create certainty, it is first and foremost to be able to classify things as belonging in one of the two domains: the domain of things one can control, know, act on or the domain of things that are unknowable, unpredictable, uncontrollable. The assumption that people always seek security or certainty is too short-sighted: it is the boundary between security and insecurity, certainty and uncertainty that must be clear if one is to have some peace of mind. This explains why the strains of modern society do not necessarily cause people to turn towards experience or the self. Rather, as has already been demonstrated in other research, an emphasis on the self is related to an individualist ethos. In contrast, my findings show that ambiguity towards religious authority and the wish to protect the familiar are more influential in informing present-day religiosity in local communities in Limburg.

Religious uncertainty fits this ethos rather well, and can be a source of hope, belief in progress and democratic values rather than a source of anxiety. To people in Limburg, it can be a relief to hear that morality
cannot be deduced from ontology. This realization can become the means to legitimate their (usually passive) resistance to religious authorities.

NOTES

1. The reasons for the resignation of Gijsen are vague (health), but generally people seem to think he had made too many enemies among the council of bishops of the Netherlands. His new diocese became Iceland, which is (still) a source of much satisfaction to many people in Limburg.

REFERENCES


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