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RELIGION AND GENDER IN EUROPE

Gender and Catholic authorities

19th-20th centuries

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ABSTRACT

Religions contribute to the production of gender identities within European societies. During the twentieth century, the democratization and secularization which emerged from the liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century transformed religious authorities. While Catholic authorities supported traditional gender relations, the models proposed caused tension with their lay counterparts, for example the model of priestly masculinity founded on celibacy. Catholicism also represented a paradoxical and relative space of subversion by offering women a place of fulfilment and independence at a time when they were side-lined from the civic space. The twentieth century was increasingly marked by a tougher stance on the part of religious authorities with regard to traditional gender norms, which conditioned the evolution of relations to the political, up through the very contemporary debates surrounding "marriage for all."

The nineteenth century was a time of reflecting on the role of religious authorities within European societies, as revolutions (France) and nation-building processes (Italy, Germany, Belgium) lastingly marked the connections between political authorities and Catholics. The fight against the Church was sometimes a component of political projects, for instance in France beginning in 1791, or in Italy during the Risorgimento (1848-1870). Anticlerical agitation affected different countries: in Spain, congregation members were attacked during the revolution of 1868 that dethroned Queen Isabella II, while priests were arrested in Portugal during the republican revolution of October 1910. Contested throughout the century, the Catholic Church, a patriarchal institution led by men, sought to regain influence by positioning itself in the fields of spiritual, social, and intimate life, as well as by relying on the naturalized gendered difference that it helped produce and reinforce.

During the nineteenth century, women, who were on the whole more observant than men, were considered as the privileged agents for converting men and children, thanks to their role as wives and mothers. The clergy diffused renewed models of devotion that were deemed better adapted to a female public. Worship of the Sacred Heart enjoyed great success from Madrid to Belgium to Rome. Women’s associations were encouraged to consolidate the role of Catholicism in the fields of social and spiritual matters. Female congregations offering care and instruction, along with associations of Catholic women, defended a social and spiritual maternity by caring for children or the less privileged. The engagement of secular women took on a political tone with the Spanish legitimists of the Second Carlist War (1846-1849), or in the opposition to Italian unification up until the capture of Rome in 1870. Education, care, and religious authority (in missionary lands) were increasingly embodied by nuns, who held unprecedented roles: entering a religion made it possible to free oneself from a father’s or a husband’s authority, and to build a genuine professional career. This led to negotiations, appropriations, and even contestation of the masculine authorities of the Church. Congregations sought to gain spiritual independence from male chaplains and congregations. A few women, such as the Carmelite Thérèse de Lisieux (1873-1897), expressed a desire to serve

as a priest.

Catholic authorities promoted a gender system which attributed different roles to men and women, in accordance with an essentialist conception of their natures: maternity, education, and caring for the family to women, and public and economic affairs to men. This does not mean that the models for femininity and masculinity were rigid. Catholic masculinity emphasized qualities that were considered “feminine” elsewhere, such as investing in the household or developing an aptitude for being sensitive. During the twentieth century, the devotions that were encouraged emphasized gender expectations within the family, for instance through the figure of Christ the King (established as a universal feast by Pius XI in 1925). This worship consisted of the crowning of a Sacred Heart statue of Jesus within the domestic space. Boys and girls were not called on for the same tasks in the name of a personalist, differentialist, and naturalist conception of gender. The Church also reaffirmed its position in matters of conjugal morality by condemning the use of contraceptive methods for married Catholic couples (*Casti conubii*, 1930), whereas Anglicanism adopted a more flexible stance. Rome also continued to oppose “*géminé*” [coeducational] schools during the interwar period.

The evolution of gender models nevertheless reveals the flexibility with which Catholic authorities consented to innovations in the name of a pastoral ideal of reconquest. French and Italian *ligueuses*, laypersons engaged in Christian unionism, and female members of secular institutes (recognized in 1947) helped the role of European Catholic women to evolve. They were called on to engage with the social problems of their time, while the gender assignments they were subject to remained stable: preparation for personal and domestic maternity (care), which was social and exalted. In Spain, the “social help” (*auxilio social*) women’s movement, “ordained by God” and under the patronage of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and Isabella of Castile (1451-1504), integrated the female section of the Falange in 1937, and promoted a “new woman” rooted in the anti-feminist ideal of Francoism. This bears witness to the hybridization between a new form inspired by the organization of fascism and an enduring gender ideology.

Disruptions occurred during the second half of the twentieth century, as French *prêtres ouvriers* (priests working alongside the workers) questioned the markers of priestly masculinity, that is to say the absence of paid work and the wearing of the cassock. From their rise during the 1940s to their condemnation in 1954, they sought to converge labourer and Catholic masculinities through their political and union commitment, in an effort to address men from working class backgrounds. After their condemnation, some returned to secular life by marrying and starting a family. This internal challenge to a foundational gender norm of Catholicism was, for all that, not powerful enough to shake the dominant model.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was an important landmark in a European context of profound change. Women’s wage-earning work was referred to with the expression “promotion of women,” and presented as a “sign of the times” by Pope John XXIII (*Pacem in terris*, 1963). In a context of growing free speech, Pope Paul VI (1897-1978) welcomed the rise of “feminism” in spite of many restrictions. Despite Salazarism, Portuguese Catholics from the Academic Centre for Christian Democracy of the University of Coimbra published a manifesto in May 1970 demanding “radical equality for women.” Lay Catholics were concerned about matters of conjugal morals. Council fathers watched as the question of birth control was withdrawn from them by the pope and entrusted to a commission open to couples. Against their advice, Pope Paul VI withdrew the condemnation of contraception (*Humanae vitae*, 1968). Finally, in 1971, the Roman synod on ordained ministers closed the partially open door on the subject of priesthood, as Catholic priests would remain celibate men.

Once the crisis of the 1970s had passed, religious authorities did not abandon their claims to establishing norms for the sexual and gendered behaviour of European societies in the name of theological tradition. Since the 1980s, there has on the contrary been an identity reconfiguration of Catholicism around a gender ideology with signs of intransigence. This takes the form of the defence of an “anthropology,” one led by committed lay movements. In

2013 in France, these groups made themselves heard, and expressed their attachment to the heterosexual conjugal and family model that must be applied to all, even non-believers. The law for opening up marriage to all, which was voted on and accepted by the Conseil constitutionnel [Constitutional Council], was deemed to be illegitimate. Similarly, Irish bishops opposed same-sex marriage during the referendum of 2015, yet this did not prevent a "yes" vote from winning out in this country with a strong Catholic tradition. Reflecting on the link between gender and Catholic authorities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries subsequently entails exploring the simultaneously emancipating and conservative role of religious organizations with regard to gender roles in Europe.

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