

Church Bells Are Still Ringing. But the Minarets?

Secularisation in Flanders

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During the past few decades, the framework of shared values and beliefs in Flemish society has changed fundamentally. People of my generation (I was born in 1974) or younger, can hardly imagine the extent to which social and personal life until the beginning of the 1970s was still steeped in religion. Virtually everybody was a church-going Catholic and non-believers had much to fight against. God was everywhere and the church enjoyed wide influence and power.

Parishes made up the social fabric. They created tightly knit communities and fostered the development of all kinds of social activity. Sunday was a special day with its own dress code and rituals. Sacraments were holy; priests were counsellors. Confession was therapeutically liberating for an all too pervasive sense of guilt.

The best students became priests or Jesuits. Flanders enthusiastically sent its sons and daughters out as missionaries. Catholic priests wore the cassock; nuns graced schools and all kinds of other institutions with their often ostentatious wimples. Preaching instilled respect and sometimes even fear in people, and bishops could give powerful political advice quite shamelessly. Flanders had long been a Catholic state and anyone who did not attend a Catholic school could forget about going to heaven. In any case, the secular state schools were intended for 'a different kind of public' from the Catholic schools.

Until the end of the 1960s, the contraceptive pill was not freely available. Those who did not want too many children therefore had to rely on periodic abstinence. Making love freely and for pleasure, abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality were taboo subjects. God was omniscient, so swearing was prohibited – even in the toilet hung signs to remind you. Moreover, beyond blasphemy, swearing symbolised self-gratification and the harbouring of deviant or exciting thoughts.

Flemish society was marked by ideological fault lines and civil society was compartmentalised along these lines. The many organisations still with a 'C' (Christian) or a 'K' (Catholic) in their name bear witness to this 'pillarisation' of society. The press, nursing, social services, education, trades unions, workers' movements, the health service, development aid, youth movements, sports clubs and brass bands were all subjected to the logic of pillarisation. Daily life



Ida Claes (Sister Amata),
Sister of Love of Jesus and
Maria

was organised on the basis of vertical pluralism without horizontal connections. You were born, went to school, were professionally and socially active, were insured and syndicated, were nursed and died all within the same 'pillar'. Individuals and families were given a clear ideological label which determined their social and professional opportunities. There was scarcely any contact with other ideological groups. Those living in local authority housing would not be given social housing run by the church. Not only was there no contact, there was also a form of polarisation. Liberals and socialists were long regarded by the church as allies of Satan, while atheists saw the power of the church's institutions and organisations as the chief obstacle to any kind of freedom. It is in this context that, in the Netherlands as well as in Flanders, organisations such as the Humanistisch Verbond [Humanist Association] emerged in the mid-twentieth century. They fought for the interests and equal treatment of non-believers and on the basis of humanist values such as freedom of enquiry, freedom of opinion, the separation of church and state, and self-determination, they struggled to free all sections of society from the domination of clerical power.

Secularisation

The society described above no longer exists. Secularisation, the process by which God and his commandments cease to impact on society, has in a short space of time redrawn the ideological landscape. Participation in the church and religious involvement have diminished drastically; the doctrinal authority of the church, even among believers and churchgoers, has shrunk; belief in God and a life after death is declining and in general religion is playing a much more modest role at the personal and social level than ever before.

Church festivals like Christmas, Easter and Whitsun have become *Catho-lay* festivals: everybody has a holiday and visits family and friends, but do not ask them what is actually being celebrated or commemorated. The old cultural frame of reference is vanishing completely, and young people often no longer even appear to recognise icons of the Madonna and Child.

Since Flanders was previously almost uniformly Catholic, secularisation can be seen as a shrinking process for the Roman Catholic Church. The statistics for church attendance may not tell the whole story but they are nevertheless striking and revealing. The percentage of those who attend church regularly has dropped to under 5% and their average age is above sixty-five. Weekly, let alone daily, church activity, which until a few decades ago punctuated so many people's lives, is as good as dead. Church buildings now lie empty and are being sold and diverted to other uses.

Whereas in the late 1960s virtually all children were baptised, the figure has now dropped to about half. The percentage of church weddings has declined even more. In 1967, 92% of all marriages in Flanders were celebrated in church. In 2016, that number had dropped to under 25%. In consequence,



Emile Claus, *First Communion*, 1893

we can expect the number of infant baptisms in the near future to fall sharply. Parents who are not married in church are less likely to have their children baptised or receive religious education; all sociological and psychological research shows how important parents are for the continuation of a religious tradition. The number of people who do not participate at all in church activities or are involved with the church in any way will continue to rise. The end of secularisation is not yet in sight.

In addition, the numbers in holy and religious orders are reaching rock bottom. Monasteries and abbeys have been turned into old people's homes or are standing empty. The Catholic Church in Belgium is entitled to more than 7,000 priests, paid for by the state, yet fewer than half that number has been appointed. The priesthood is faced with extinction and these days seldom seen as a vocation. There is therefore not only a problem of an aging priesthood, but also the threat of an absolute shortage of staff. Priests are working increasingly long hours and are being given more and more functions and parishes. The parish structure has been reformed; seminaries have been regrouped; priests are being imported and lay parish assistants are being appointed. But this still does not solve the problem of how the Flemish church can survive without priests.

When asked, about half the Flemish population still identifies as Catholic or Christian. But seen in the light of actual church practice, most of these people are 'cultural Christians'. They find Christian values important, recognise the value of certain parts of the Christian tradition; opt for a Catholic school and may even allow their children to receive their first communion but for the rest, they have little or nothing to do with the church and its religious activities and beliefs. Increasingly, one hears the complaint from priests and 'genuine' believers that rituals are being eroded because people no longer participate from religious conviction and have almost no sense of the religious. For instance, people may still want to get married in church but only on condition that the priest promises not to talk too much about God.

Flanders or Rome?

Even those who have not turned their back on the church often find themselves at odds with it. The Second Vatican Council's (1962-65) more conciliatory approach has been undermined by the church's rigid approach towards sexuality (e.g. *Humanae Vitae* 1968; *Veritatis Splendor* 1993) and the position of women in the church. This means that even those who have stayed with the church (sometimes described as 'terrain Catholics') live out their faith as if there were no Pope in a kind of concealed schism. Certainly in the case of sexuality, few Flemish Catholics, priests, theologians or teachers of Catholicism now accept the official position. Even the faithful no longer attempt to defend the view that contraception and homosexual activity are intrinsically evil, that sexuality outside marriage is a sin and that divorce is forbidden. A good number of priests have a 'forbidden' partner, but bishops overlook this so long as it remains 'hidden'. And in response to the convening of an Extraordinary Synod on the Family in October 2014, Johan Bonny the Bishop of Antwerp wrote a memorable working paper that called for greater openness and far-reaching reform in the sphere of ethics.



Graduation at Sint-Barbacollege s.j., Ghent, 1964: the Jesuits are still wearing a soutane

Research carried out in 2013 and 2014 confirmed that practising and non-practising Catholics are steadily losing confidence in the church. Nearly four out of five Catholics in Flanders said that they were ashamed or disappointed in the Catholic Church; almost sixty percent were of the opinion that the church had become irrelevant as an institution; and seventeen percent were thinking of leaving the church. There could be a connection here to the scandals of child abuse, involving even a bishop, which have come to light in the past few years.

In liturgical matters too, the faithful do not always find inspiration in the traditional church rituals. In recent decades, there have been various initiatives in liturgical experiment and the creation of new Christian communities. While some communities flourish, others soon disappear, and the Catholic Church tends not to support or recognise them.

Young people in Flanders

The education system in Flanders is unusual. About 70% of pupils attend state-funded Catholic schools. As these schools are fully subsidised by the government, in principle, anyone is welcome to attend, though the study of Roman Catholicism is obligatory. The majority of pupils in these schools are not religious and do not attend church, but half of all Muslim children in Flanders also attend Catholic schools. The secular state schools, on the other hand, are obliged to offer classes in any recognised belief system if there is demand. In secondary education, half of all pupils follow a course in non-confessional ethics organised by the government-recognised Union of Humanistic Freethinkers (UVV). About a quarter of all pupils in secular state schools study Catholicism; a fifth study Islam. Through immigration and demographic developments, the percentage of Muslim pupils has increased considerably. But in spite of secularisation, the balance of numbers between the courses in Catholicism and in non-confessional ethics has remained fairly stable. Rituals which were previously linked almost automatically to Catholic religious education, however, are

steadily losing their attraction. The practice of confirmation (usually at the age of twelve) has declined by 30% in the last ten years and over a third of children in Catholic education no longer receive their first communion.

Indeed, surveys among young people have shown that the fastest growing group has no allegiance to any particular set of beliefs. Secularisation has not led to an increase of membership of the humanistic freethinkers organisations among young people. On the contrary, that group is also in decline. Young people are thinking outside the box. A third of them claim to be ideologically indifferent and not to follow any traditional set of religious or non-religious beliefs. Less and less do they look for meaning and orientation in their lives in what we would traditionally think of as religion or ideology. That does not mean they are nihilists; rather that they find meaning socially, materially and individually without much ideological dependency.

Will God return?

Whether one welcomes it or not, what is certain is that the role of religion in Flemish society has never been so small, and that hardly anywhere outside Western Europe has religion been sidelined to such an extent. Nevertheless, religion has not disappeared. In particular, the presence of Islam (and to a lesser extent evangelical churches) has contributed to the fact that religion remains visible and religious diversity is a topic of social debate. About 6% of the population of Flanders is Muslim. In cities such as Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp this percentage is considerably higher and in certain schools and neighbourhoods there are large Muslim majorities. It is, of course, true that because of immigration there is more religious activity in Flanders than if there had been no immigration. But that does not mean that the process of secularisation is being reversed. On the contrary, it simply shows that elsewhere – where the immigrants come from – secularisation has not manifested itself in the same way as here. Furthermore, it is still unclear how the traditional beliefs and



Graduation at Sint-Barbacollege s.j., Ghent, 1965: the Jesuits are wearing trousers for the first time

practices of Islam will survive here. In reaction against the pressure of Western secularisation, some have chosen to emphasise religion as an identity marker. The relative success of Salafism is an example. There is however also another larger group which is being secularised. The first signs of 'de-mosqueing' and a more relaxed attitude to religious rules are already observable.

Neither is the greater interest shown by the media for religion and religious issues in Flanders an expression of de-secularisation. Television programmes about religion sometimes do quite well and there is a great deal of information and discussion of religion on the radio and in the press. But far from signifying a religious revival, the focus is on particular religious phenomena, preferably when they are extraordinary or shocking, or at least presented as such.

It sounds paradoxical but it is precisely because Flanders is so deeply secularised that the presence of religion is attracting greater interest and is the subject of debate. Secularisation makes the presence of religion not only more noticeable but also more problematic. A few decades ago, for example, the current debate about wearing clothing with religious significance in public (e.g. the hijab, crucifix or turban) would have been unthinkable. Religion was everywhere and until the mid-1960s, the sight of priests and nuns in their religious attire on the street or in schools was commonplace. Now it is conspicuous,



Courtyard of the boarding school The Holy Sepulchre, Bilzen, 1992

© Annie van Gemert

Exorcism of the devil
from the famous Flemish
cyclist Freddy Maertens,
Lombardsijde, 1990
© Herman Selleslags



Translated by Chris Emery

sometimes even suspicious, when Muslim men grow their beards and women piously wear a headscarf. And whereas church bells may still be rung everywhere and at all times in Flanders, minarets (if they are allowed to exist at all) are enjoined not to make too much 'noise'.

So long as society was permeated by religion, the public expression of religiosity was hardly noticed, let alone the subject of public debate. Secularisation and religious diversity have changed all that. Just at a time when secularisation in Flanders has reached its peak and society hardly knows how to deal with domestic religious expression in public places, large numbers of immigrants have arrived with a strong and visible religious identity. Furthermore, their religiosity has had little experience of secularism and on some issues is fundamentally at odds with the assumptions of secular society. In that context it is therefore to be expected that Flanders should be debating the head scarf and religious dress, the preparation of kosher and halal food, the authority of sharia law, the interpretation of sacred texts, creationism, praying on the work floor, freedom of expression, homosexuality, animal slaughter without stunning, tensions between science and faith, freedom of religion, and equality between men and women. Religion is a subject of debate in spite of and because of secularisation – not because secularisation is in retreat. ■