

T. Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex. Catholic Constructions of Masculinity and Femininity in Belgium, c. 1800-1940* (Leuven University Press: Leuven, 2013, 272 pp., ISBN 9789058679505).

Tine Van Osselaer's meticulously researched *The Pious Sex* constitutes the most recent comprehensive product of the first generation of scholars that thoroughly developed the study of gender, and specifically masculinity, in the modern history of the Low Countries. Apart from the author's publications, noteworthy in this regard is the work of Henk de Smaele, Josephine Hoegaerts, Thomas Buerman and their Dutch counterpart Stefan Dudink.

Gender as an analytical category has informed historical research for over thirty years, but the nuanced study of the configuration of gender identities themselves, how these functioned in a society and shaped its power dynamics, and how they related to other categories of difference that mattered in a given time and place, is much younger – about two decades or so. Also, gender historians took an interest in the contemporary history of Belgium – or The Netherlands, for that matter – considerably later than in the history of expansive nations such as The United Kingdom or France, for which some scholars, such as John Tosh (1999), Michael Roper (1994) and Alain Corbin (2011), came to the fore as frontrunners in the history of manhood. Yet thanks to the efforts of the above-mentioned authors, we are now beginning to understand the role of gender in such areas as nineteenth- and twentieth-century Belgian politics, war, and religion. Van Osselaer's new book, in which she aims to address the creation of – and shifts in – Catholic masculinities and femininities from c. 1800 to the eve of the Second World War, provides an important contribution to the issue of the interplay between gender and religion.

In fact, the author seems to have written two books. One is a chronological history of how the Belgian Catholic Church navigated society's dominant binary gender systems and how it used gender ideology creatively to try to (re)gain the support of the laity, which it felt it was losing to various adversaries such as Socialism, Liberalism, urbanization, and modernity in general. Van Osselaer focuses on the consecutive lay movements of the Apostolate of Prayer and Leagues of the Sacred Heart (in the long nineteenth century), and on the later, diverse initiatives of the Catholic Action (mainly 1930s-1940s). These movements did not so much spontaneously stem from vibrant lay religious sentiments as they were deliberately initiated and controlled by a – generally ultramontane – Church hierarchy that was still holding its own. With an impressive mastery of the sources, Van Osselaer

paints a compelling picture of a Church that felt threatened but actively responded and picked its battles in a remarkably strategic and – so the book shows – a gendered way. Whether the situation was really as dire – especially among lay males – as some in the Church imagined, however, remains rather uncertain. In general, the nineteenth century is regarded as a period of relative success for Catholicism in Belgium, especially in Flanders. Perhaps the author might have elaborated a bit more on the context, for example on the effectiveness – or even reality – of the forces blamed for working against religion. Overall, Van Osselaer's story is convincing, but it is almost entirely based on clerical rhetoric alone. Allowing the laity's own voices to be heard more frequently, even if they were obviously anticlerical or, conversely, moderated by the Church, would have contextualised the now prevailing crisis-narrative of truancy.

It might also have enriched the second 'book', or rather historical debate, that makes up *The Pious Sex*, and that is arguably one of its major strengths, namely Van Osselaer's head-on confrontation of some of the most established theories of the modern research field of gender and religion. She raises pertinent questions about the paradigm of recurring 'crises' of masculinity and the related grand narrative about the quantitative and discursive 'feminisation' of religion in the nineteenth century. This is no mean feat, since in gender studies on pre-modern societies for example, these all-pervading frames are only just now being reviewed. In some of the best parts of the book, she points out that women may indeed have been more numerous in the churches or more readily involved in religious devotion, whilst at the same time arguing, with great success, that the Church devoted a lot of attention to men and even developed a 'masculine' religiosity in the all-male Leagues or in certain movements of the Catholic Action. Van Osselaer's critiques also rightly confront the reader with the fact that even in the nineteenth century, the so-called heyday of patriarchal, binary gender role differentiation, diversity was key and divergence not unheard-of, especially in religion.

Drawing from rich source materials, the author manages to pinpoint the female leadership of the Apostolate of Prayer, for example, or the integration of 'feminine' elements in the ideal of the Catholic hero used by the Church to rally male support. In her discussion of this last point, which is tucked away in the somewhat curiously detached chapter on *Gendering Heroism*, the author unfortunately fails to fully explain the centuries-old – and thus rather common – Christian tradition of presenting men with certain positively evaluated 'feminine' virtues and roles such as the nurturing care and compassion of mothers or the chastity of virgins. These characteristics were simply regarded as more common for women in society in general, and the fact that they still were in the nineteenth century probably proves the tenacity of restrictive gender clichés rather than the existence of tactics of gender bending and empowerment. Overall, it would have been appropriate

to contextualise certain findings a bit more thoroughly within the Christian tradition rather than making passing references to practices harking back to the Church Fathers or Medieval theologians. Again, it is unfortunate that the reader is not let in on the reaction of the laity itself to the ideas and identities promoted by the Church, however neatly Van Osselaer lays them out, at least not the reaction of the laity that was not heavily involved in religion. We can only hope this inspires the author to write an additional book on the matter; one that will make equally essential reading as this one.

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