CHAPTER 7: IN CONCLUSION

1. INTRODUCTION

In chapter 1, the theoretical background to the BSS programme and this particular research was elaborated. It is now time to return to those considerations and recapitulate the research questions:

What is the nature and place of religion in the south of Limburg, the Netherlands, and what role does it play in moral orientation?

1. What are the discourses that have shaped the religious landscape in Limburg, specifically the discussions on morals in Dutch Catholicism since World War II?

2. How do ‘lay’ Catholics in the south of Limburg perceive the changes in the local religious landscape, and what does it mean to them in terms of moral orientation?

3. What are the place and significance of religious institutions, repertoires and practices within the present-day local landscape of village communities in the South of Limburg?

4. How do locally embedded religious discourses shape the way people orient themselves and how do people approach these discourses?

These questions have all been discussed in the previous chapters. In chapter 2 I have shown which discourses have shaped the religious landscape and moral orientation in Dutch Catholicism. Chapter 3 described how the changes within Catholicism are perceived by the post-war generation. Chapter 4 positioned the various religious institutions and repertoires within the local landscape and chapters 5 and 6 described two specific religious contexts and the interactions going on within these particular contexts. In this chapter, I will attempt to contextualize the descriptions and interpretations offered in these chapters within the larger debate indicated in chapter 1.

In moving from the larger debate on the place and nature of religion in Western European societies, often dominated by statistical research, philosophical speculations and research based on emic literature, to the specific context of the South of Limburg, some general findings catch the attention. First of all, the contrast between the perceptions of the people of the elder generation in Welden and the shifts in discourse within Dutch Catholicism discussed in chapter 2 reveal that, according to the emic perceptions of the elder generation in Welden, they did not really change, the church changed. Their moral orientation, according to themselves, did not really undergo any major shifts, and they do not see the moral orientation of their children as fundamentally different from that of their own, although it is freer. The changes in the church came from above and upset the shared routines of life that had been created by the church in the first place, more than upsetting their own moral reasoning. It also definitively undermined the authority of the priest as the somehow otherworldly gatekeeper to the sacred.
This is connected to the theme that emerged in chapter 4 and continued in the
other two chapters: lay Catholics in Welden, especially the people of the post-war
generations, express an ambivalent attitude towards authority, especially religious
authority and this determines much of their moral orientation. However, this does not
mean that no authority but that of ‘the self’ is accepted (even on a rhetorical level), on
the contrary. Religious (and professional) authority is rarely challenged openly. If
possible, it is ignored and avoided or shut out from the private sphere. If this is not
possible, more and more they are only accepted on the terms of moral reasoning of the
domain of the familiar, a moral reasoning that is firmly embedded in existing
relationships, family life and the community. In this domesticating of ‘unfamiliar
authority’, consumerism plays an important role: people ‘buy’ their freedom of religion.
Alternative spiritualities circumvent the problem in doctrine as well, because they start
from the familiar, and grew out of a critique of authority.

Because the rituals of the Catholic Church are important in maintaining and
recreating the domain of the familiar, the moral values of the familiar sometimes come
into conflict with the mechanism of the sacraments as it is enforced by some of the
priests of the diocese. Both liberal and conservative Catholics use these rituals as entry-
points. However, the liberal Catholics seem to be more successful in dealing with the
ambivalent attitude towards authority and connecting with the values of the familiar.

In chapters 5 and 6, the descriptions of two religious contexts show in more
detail how religious repertoires and discourses are approached, learned and used. The
humanness and subjectivity of those with religious authority or ‘access’ to the sacred is
an important tool in the ‘familiarising’ of this authority, as well as an emphasis on
developing one’s own skills (e.g. learning how to read and interpret the bible for the
pastoral centre, developing paranormal perception for the Spiritual group). This
ambivalent attitude towards authority is different in emphasis from the individualism
often closely associated with present-day religiosity. Rather than an attempt to answer
‘the painful question of the self’ the trend seems to be towards religious repertoires
being imported into the familiar spheres through education, training, reading and forms
of consumerism to strengthen and sacralize the familiar: from nuclear family, extended
family, to local elementary school and the local community. In this family life and
community life, people have their designated roles, yet they are also irreplaceable and
known and valued as unique persons.

Furthermore, the Spiritual Association of the Hills and the paranormal markets
show that beliefs that can be classified under the general heading of New Age and
alternative spiritualities are much more literal and less metaphoric than other studies of
New Age and alternative spiritualities have described the beliefs of people engaged in
New Age and alternative spiritualities in other contexts. Whereas Ramstedt and others
found that people involved in the forms of alternative spirituality they studied do not
seem to care whether something is ‘a metaphor or an invocation’, the people of the
Spiritual Association most certainly do care about the reality of ‘the other side’. There is
a strong emphasis on the existence of ‘the other side’ as a fact that should influence
people’s moral attitudes on ‘this side’ significantly. An important reason to start frequenting the spiritual association and the paranormal markets is the desire to know whether a recently deceased loved one has ‘arrived safely’, to get messages from ‘the other side’ and thus continue the relationship with the deceased, and via this interest, to develop a stronger trust in the divine ordering of all of life.

In this concluding chapter, my intention is to consider how the findings of this detailed research, in the very specific context of the South of Limburg and Welden, can be related to the general debate on the place of religion in Western European societies. To do this, and to throw a different light on the findings of this research, I first discuss the material presented here in relation to the central themes of the other researchers in the BSS programme: identity, language, ritual and experience. That will be discussed in section 2 of this chapter. In section 3, I will return to the debates on the nature and place of religion in modern-day society mentioned in chapter 1 by discussing religious change from an anthropological point of view.

2. The five themes

The purpose of this part is not to exhaustively compare all aspects of ritual, language, experience and identity with those of the other researches in the BSS programme. After all, I did not really do research on all these topics, and the other researches did not do this either. The point is to give a cross-section of the findings of this research taking the other themes of the BSS programme as the point of departure, to present the findings from a new angle, and to compare the picture that emerges from this exercise with that of the other researches and the wider literature.

Ritual

Clearly, rituals are important to the people of Welden and to those frequenting the pastoral centre and the Spiritual Association of the Hills, especially the Catholic lifecycle rituals. However, they are less important because of their religious content than of the way they have of marking important moments in personal life and in community life. These rituals, people feel, are part of their heritage. It is important that they are carried out with no hitches; but they are not very much concerned with the details or what is said. Especially the younger generations admit that they normally ‘block’ what is said during mass.

One exception to this rule are the last rites: here, the potential for conflict is enormous, especially between conservative priests and the descendants of the deceased. To the pre-war generation, the ‘proper’ performance of the rituals around death and dying alleviates their anxiety about dying and going to heaven. They want to die having received all the sacraments, and in the knowledge that they will be ‘prayed into heaven’.

To the post-war generations it seems that the rituals around death and dying are primarily an occasion to emphasize that they care that this particular person has died. Everyone should be able to join in this performance of appreciation of the
deceased. A priest who plays gatekeeper to the sacred, curtailing the expression of care, or invokes the mechanism of the sacraments to exclude certain groups of people, can provoke great moral outrage and hate.

Interestingly, the idea that the sacred is a separate domain to which access can be denied is not challenged in the narratives of the conflicts that can arise around the last rites. People do not posit another concept of the sacred to counter the claims of the priest. But the ritual authority of the priest to play gatekeeper to this domain is seen as something he should use very judiciously and carefully, without alienating people who normally live their lives according to their own best insights. Above all, he should not appear to pass judgement on them.

In this behaviour it can be seen that the assumption that there is a heaven, and that the church in general and priests in particular have some special knowledge or relationship to it, is still firmly implanted in people’s minds and actions. Although they might not actively ‘believe’ in it when asked by an interviewer conducting a survey, it is present as part of a latent set of meanings that is activated in certain circumstances and that can certainly be activated in ritual, both within and outside of the Catholic Church.

In the pastoral centre, the use of private rituals such as lighting a candle and praying were reinforced, as well as wakes for the dead. The pastors presented these practices as forms of folk Catholicism that have continued to exist throughout all the changes in the church, the depolarization of Dutch society and the secularization of the public sphere. Even private confession is possible for those who wish to confess, and they are also available for the blessing of objects or saying special prayers for difficult children. The pastoral centre reframes these practices as moments of seeking contact with the divine for those in need. Many of the people I interviewed said they prayed, lit candles in difficult times or in case of illness in the family. Although mass devotional rituals are becoming scarce, private devotional practices are all but disappearing. I am sure the ‘free-floating’ religiosity available in consumer forms will only reinforce this. However, I did not go into this subject very deeply.

In the Spiritual association of the Hills, ritual was an occasion to directly feel and experience the divine. In fact, it is hard to be sure whether there was anything ‘ritual’ about the practices of the Spiritual association, because they were full of purpose, and not very strictly scripted. Nevertheless, there were recognisable forms for

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71 Old definitions of ritual, such as the one used by Turner (e.g. Turner 1966), see it as a mode of action which is characterized by a disconnection from instrumental action, it does not produce results. However, Bell defines ritual, or rather ritualization in the following way: “I will use the term ‘ritualization’ to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.” (Bell 1992:74)
contacting ‘the other side’ such as healings, séances and psychic readings. These were very different from, for example, lectures, celebrations or workshops. Although mediums and psychics dominated and led these ‘rituals’ it was supposed that in some way everybody was experiencing something from ‘the other side’. This makes the rituals of the Spiritual Association more enervating and intense than the rituals of the Catholic Church, where God is either far away and abstract (as with the liberal Catholics) or present but only to be handled (literally) by the priest during the Eucharist.

Experience

This leads us to the next subject: experience. The Spiritual Association of the Hills was the only place described in this book where experience was an important theme, the tool to grow spiritually. However, it was a tool to grow spiritually primarily because it enabled people to ‘see for themselves’ that the ‘other side’ really exists, that there is such a thing as a divine ordering of life, that everything has purpose and meaning. Generally, people wanted to ‘experience’, to ‘feel’, to see and hear extraordinary things but it was only at the paranormal markets and the Spiritual Association where this was actively pursued. Unlike other Christian centres with a Catholic background, the pastoral centre did not encourage the exploring of subjective experience (compare Verseeg 2006). In fact, in the pastoral centre supposedly ‘direct’ experiences such as near death experiences of all-encompassing divine love were distrusted. In the discussion groups, individual religious experiences were sometimes discussed, but these were always reframed as ‘moments of grace’ or ‘being touched’, not an end in themselves, something to strive for and develop or ‘proof’ of God’s existence. Likewise, the miracles in the gospels were often interpreted as the religious experiences of those involved: of Jesus, of the onlookers, of Jesus’ partner in conversation rather than as proof or as a sign of a highly developed spirituality.

However, experience did come up as a subject whenever the ‘old’ Catholic doctrines were discussed: people would complain that their subjective ‘experience’ of God and religion in general did not fit the image of ‘God the Father’ or what their parish priest was saying. The subjective understanding of religious wisdom had a very important place in the practices of the centre, and especially the more motivated participants often contrasted this with the ‘routine’ and shallow religiosity of old, where you were taught to just rattle off as many prayers as you could, without really knowing what you were saying. And the ‘experience’ of learning to read and understand the bible in a way that made sense to the women who had originally come there to learn how to create a family service, sometimes came close to the intensity of a conversion. But again, this ‘experience’ was not the end goal of the exercise, but rather a ‘felt understanding’ (doorleefd begrijpen) of the religious texts and prayers they were handling so that they would feel confident enough to act on this understanding rather than looking towards the authority of the priest in everything.

In the interviews with the elder generation or with the younger generation and key informants, religious experience was not a topic that was discussed often. When it

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was discussed, it was usually in connection to the passing away of a spouse or another intensely emotional moment. For example, one lady told me that at the moment her husband died she saw a garland of flowers in the shape of a heart hovering over her husband. Again, it was not sought out but simply happened amid all the worries, joys and sorrow of what they themselves described as a perfectly ordinary life.

Both in the Spiritual Association of the hills and in the pastoral centre, the aim of participating in these contexts was to create a better ‘fit’ between subjective life and religious representations of the world. However, the kind of experiences and the kind of conclusion one was encouraged or allowed to draw from these experiences were radically different. Strangely though, participants of both contexts moved much more fluently between these two ‘modes’ than the ‘experts’ of these scenes and what was considered metaphorical in the pastoral centre (angels, the Holy Spirit, grace) was often translated literally by some of the participants via their personal ‘direct’ experience of these things as real (near death experiences, paranormal perceptions).

Language

A pluralistic religious environment means that people use different vocabularies to discuss religiosity. Add to this the background of polarization and the strong emphasis on the expertise of priests and the duty of lay Catholics to listen to him in all things, and it is perhaps not surprising that the Catholic religious vocabularies used by the younger generation were very poor and clumsy: they knew many expression, but knew not what they meant. In contrast, the older generation had had extensive teaching in these vocabularies, and used set expressions for many common life situations.

In the pastoral centre, the strangeness of the ‘old’ religious vocabularies to the younger generations or the antipathy some people of the older generation felt against religious vocabularies was recognized as an important issue, and lay volunteers were trained to be flexible in their use of religious language, not to alienate or hit the wrong note with someone. Language was painstakingly inclusive. In the spiritual association, different vocabularies could also be easily translated into one another. Generally, the flexibility with which the post-war generations could discuss religious matters was remarkable: instead of set expressions, they used abstract concepts that smoothed over any differences in opinion. Sometimes, discussions in the pastoral centre would get lost in detail, but generally the pastors managed to bring the group round to consider ‘the essence’ that went beyond the particular words different people use. So although the vocabulary of the younger generation was not as rich, it was very flexible once they allowed themselves to believe that an ‘approximation’ of religious truths was all that was necessary. This flexibility reflects a moral orientation that people want to be able to deal with pluralism, to be inclusive, to accommodate people different from themselves.

The younger generation was also more comfortable speaking in Dutch, unlike the older generation who often could only be convinced to tell their stories after being reassured that I could understand the dialect. The older generation more often used set expressions and cliché sayings to make their point, in which a particular solution to a
moral dilemma or paradox, a summing up of the situation, was reflected. In fact, it was these set expressions that I initially used to organize chapter 3: ‘I do not go for the priest, I go for God’, ‘Those with the thickest heads sit in front in church’, ‘that’s just the way it was, we did not think to question it’.

Remarkably, but not surprisingly knowing the shifts in discourse within Dutch Catholicism, the vocabulary of chastity that some of the old women used has disappeared completely among the younger generations. In chapter 3 I translated a large part of an interview precisely to show this vocabulary, but it was not referred to in any of the other contexts I participated in. In fact, words like chastity, ‘saving yourself’, honouring your body, or concepts such as marrying in white did not come up anywhere except as distant memories among the post-war generations. The sexual revolution has done its job thoroughly. Of course, this does not mean that the moral considerations reflected in this vocabulary have disappeared completely. In the way children are raised and young people and parents comment on sexual behaviour, they almost certainly still play a role in some way, but are perhaps better reflected in the ‘negative’ vocabulary around sexuality, mostly commenting on women’s behaviour, that is very common among young people. Although there are many words that describe a girl’s sexual behaviour as immoral (slut, whore, etc.), bantered among the youngsters waiting for the bus at the bus station, there were no words like that for men. However, the moral vocabulary around sexuality has been removed from the domain of religion and the subject itself is only tentatively approached in the pastoral centre, or not at all.

Identity

‘Being a Catholic’ is as natural as breathing for someone who is a Limburger, is part of the local community and speaks the dialect. But this is only a smaller aspect of the Limburg identity. According to Wijers, speaking the local dialect is more important than being a Catholic and I would not disagree with her (Wijers 2000). Nevertheless, the Catholic life cycle rituals and the yearly celebrations of the village community are an important part of the heritage that someone who is proud of being a Limburger cherishes. To both the older and the younger generation, having your child baptized or marrying in church ‘despite’ is an important sign of connecting with tradition. In this identity, the shared experience of being part of a local community in Limburg is paramount. If you do not speak the dialect (it is not an official language that can be learned) it becomes a little hard to claim to be a Limburger. If you’re not a Catholic, this might be thought of as strange, but you can still be a Limburger.

In the BSS-programma, identity was taken to be the aspect in which all the other aspects of religion come together. However, in this case, it would be more apt to

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Although ‘player’ and ‘loverboy’ may soon be commonplace terms in the south of Limburg as well, in fact they probably are already due to the speed with which new terms spread among subcultures
say that religion is an aspect of an identity (being a Limburger) than to say that identity is an aspect of religion. Even the older generation did not really feel the need to distinguish themselves from Protestants or other people of other religions, mostly because they are well below the horizon of most people. The people of the Spiritual Association of the Hills did not see what they were doing as having any impact on their being a Catholic. It is a given. Like a local pastor said when Gijsen threatened to take away the letter signifying ‘Roman Catholic’ from a local elementary school: ‘we are Catholic, so the school is Catholic’. The Catholic identity is not something that can be taken away, even by a strict conservative like Gijsen. Although it is not primarily a religious identity, it is deeply felt and cherished, and it does need the church every now and then. At this point, conflicts may arise.

In Limburg, the polarization within the church at the time of Gijsen has been so strong that some parishes and congregations have even opted to step outside the church. Generally however, the clergy and pastors downplay this polarization. It is only on the informal level that pluralism and disagreements in beliefs and values is admitted.

**Moral orientation**

Although moral discourses within Catholicism changed dramatically during their lifetime, the pre-war generation did not remember feeling morally confused. Again: it was not they who changed, it was the church. They saw themselves as living according to the same moral principles they always did, but with a lot less rules from ‘above’. The social mechanisms of exclusion the church had designed for those who do not live according to the rules were dismantled, but this did not worry them very greatly. In fact, they agreed that it is a good thing that they have been dismantled, although some worried that the church has given people ‘their freedom’ too fast and people are unwise in how they deal with this freedom. However, they emphasized that they trust their own children to be morally upright according to their own best insights and cherished every token that they give their parents that their upbringing has worked out well.

But in their narratives it also became clear that when the old mechanisms of exclusion were invoked, via the mechanism of the sacraments, they were afraid and nervous. In many cases, the stories had not lost their painful edge. Although the church has lost power in society, and priests with it, the clergy can still wield considerable ‘power of disapproval’ within its own ritual domains. Because these rituals are also part and parcel of community life and the traditional biography, the way the church wields its power is often the subject of intense moral outrage by those with a more openly critical attitude towards the church such as active liberal Catholics and the younger generation.

Nevertheless, it did not occur to the younger generation to challenge the church on specific moral issues; they downplayed or blocked out any disagreement they might feel with the teachings of the church. During the courses of the pastoral centre, people were often pleasantly surprised to see that the bible and ‘traditional’ Catholic religious practices could be a source for inspiration and guidance in moral orientation that does
not contradict the values by which they already lived. Sometimes, this led to the explicitly stated realization that what they were learning in their course, and what they thought were the moral teachings of the Catholic Church, were actually opposite to each other. Especially the central value of inclusiveness, closely connected to the ‘radical message of Jesus’ taught by the pastoral centre, came up against the policy of the diocese to use the mechanism of the sacraments to exclude groups of people in its own ritual domain. On the level of discourse, this difference was downplayed by the pastoral centre. It was only on the informal level of gossip and stereotyping that the pressing question of ‘who is right’ could be resolved.

The pastoral centre and the Spiritual Association of the Hills provide a more or less ‘mainstream’ moral orientation that would normally lead people to adjust better to society, rather than look for alternative lifestyles. Paradoxically, they both present their morality as radically different from the mainstream, representing society in general as not up to the moral standards they espouse.

In the spiritual association, this critical attitude was summed up by the term: ‘they are not awakened yet’. Remarkably, the spiritual association of the Hills has a very ‘harsh’ notion of personal responsibility. The emphasis is not on ‘feeling good’, or discovering who you really are, recovering the authentic self. Rather, the intention is that you learn the lessons embedded within life’s suffering.

In the pastoral centre, the gospels are presented as the ‘radical message of Jesus’, a call to every individual to live the values that Jesus showed, in the knowledge that God loves every human being. Society is represented as a cruel place, where the weak, the helpless and the poor are not well protected, where people sometimes grow up twisted and lost. It is the task of every individual to realize the ‘kingdom of heaven’ by living according to the value of ‘love thy neighbour as thyself’, protecting the weak and helping people to believe in the goodness of God.

In short, in terms of specific doctrines, concepts and ideas it was only the specialized religious contexts where the ‘traditional’ and neoconservative moral doctrines of Catholicism were openly contested. Outside these contexts, it was clear that these ‘old fashioned’ moral doctrines had no plausibility or authority whatsoever. In terms of general moral orientation and its relation to religion a much more significant shift has taken place that has redefined the entire landscape in which people orient themselves morally. This will be elaborated in the next section.

3. CHANGING RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND MORAL ORIENTATIONS AS A RENEGOTIATION OF DOMAINS

Looking at the value-orientations in present-day Welden and surroundings, an obvious conclusion would be that the shift in moral values on the local level has followed the changes in discourse within the Catholic Church and the pillarized organizations described in chapter 2. Progressive Catholic intellectuals and lower clerics initiated these changes on the local level. They were inspired by insights from psychology, the new
theology influenced by existentialism coming from France and the social sciences and the general élan pervading Dutch Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council. This shift was furthermore facilitated by the Dutch bishops and the general climate in Dutch society in the sixties, and culminated at the pastoral council in Noordwijkhout. In Welden in particular, this shift was mediated by enthusiastic priests and chaplains who became inspired to further democratic relations, emphasized the importance of the individual conscience and in general turned the focus from a discourse of sin and penance to a discourse of Christianity as a happy message of love. Furthermore, the pillarized organizations and Catholic schools took over this change in discourse and reorganized life accordingly. The power of priests in these organizations declined, while lay professionals oriented themselves more and more with the help of the criteria of their profession rather than towards the Roman guidelines.

Although we cannot assume that there were no signs of dissatisfaction on the local level, the stories of the pre-war and immediate post-war generation depict these changes as coming from the top down. The actual reasoning that initiated these changes in discourse and organization did not figure anywhere in the narratives of the changes in the Catholic Church that lay Catholics told me. However, the new delineation of responsibilities and roles that went with this moral reasoning caught on at a fundamental level and turned out to be irrevocable. Now, any priest who takes it upon him to pass moral judgements can count on being ignored or resisted. The neo-conservative restoration attempted by Gijzen was perceived as a futile attempt ‘to turn back the clock’. Although Gijzen and his priests drew on every mechanism of exclusion the Catholic Church possesses, the reaction in Welden was to relinquish the church building to the priest, and to carry on without him.

The question is then, how can we understand this shift in moral reasoning that protects this new delineation of responsibilities and roles on the grassroots level, if it was not backed up by the same reasoning process followed by intellectual Catholics (lay professionals and clerics)?

Perhaps this can be interpreted along the lines of Jackson’s description of life as a continuous negotiation of the boundary between two domains, also cited in chapter 1:

‘...in 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).

The older generation grew up with the idea that moral values belonged to the domain of God and church authorities, where ‘ordinary’ people had no say in things. From the 1920ies until the 1950ies, the efforts of the Church in Limburg had been directed towards
the social organization of safeguarding this domain, and protecting the boundaries from attacks by other discourses that would bring moral values in the ‘human’ domain. Priests and nuns were placed strategically everywhere in social life, and especially in education, to make sure that every thought that would question this boundary was nipped in the bud, as described in chapter 2.

In chapter 3, we can see that this effort was effective: in their narratives, the elder generation still presented itself as unquestionably accepting the moral order of their youth, even when they disagreed with the effect it was having on their life, as in the case of the miner’s wife. The only one who felt comfortable openly challenging a priest and telling me about it was the former soldier who had been in the war in the Dutch Indies and had learned that you should not always ‘believe those in authority’. Otherwise, everybody seemed to be used to looking towards the authorities of the church for answers with regard to new developments that challenged the rules of the church, such as the moral dilemma that arose when the birth control pill became available. This was the reason that Bekkers’ statement about birth control, broadcast on television by a Catholic broadcasting service, had such an enormous impact. Although at the time it was often simply interpreted as a ‘go ahead’ for couples to use birth control, the revolution it caused was that it removed the moral consideration of these issues from the domain of God and the Church, the domain where ‘ordinary people’ had no control, to the domain of individual consciousness, something that had to be decided between man and wife.

The statement of bishop Bekkers on birth control cannot be seen apart from the general changes in discourse and practices that were taking place in the Dutch Catholic Church for some years already. However, as it was broadcast on television and resolved a public discussion that had an impact on the life of every adult Catholic, I took his statement as the watershed, not only in the renegotiation of moral values, but also in the renegotiation of the boundaries between the two domains of life, which lies at the basis of moral reasoning.

After this, the terms of the discussion were reset for every Catholic. Moral prescriptions no longer belonged to the area outside human control. Priests were no longer the sole mediators of the morally ‘good’ life. Moral reasoning could no longer be based solely on a religious worldview, but should also take into account subjective considerations. Influenced by insights from psychology and sociology, the whole moral agenda of enforcing chastity was dropped: not only did the church decline in influence in the public sphere, much to the relief of couples it relinquished its power to set the rules in the private sphere.

Although the reasoning behind the renegotiation of the boundary (such as considerations of psychological health underpinning spiritual health introduced by the spiritual liberators) was not reflected in the interviews, informal conversations or shared narratives, the new delineation of domains was accepted. It had become the unquestioned basis for moral reasoning in everyday life. Of course, a lifetime of assuming that ‘the church has all the answers’ does not disappear overnight; but the
habit of looking towards the church for answers could now be broken without serious consequences. New ways of moral orientation became possible, and were implemented privately. But on the level of discourse, doctrine and argument, people are still uncomfortable challenging church morality. Normally, people avoid even asking the church for answers now, afraid that this will turn into an opportunity for the church to redefine the boundary, to steal back its power.

The pastoral centre knows how to connect to this new basis for moral orientation and carries it to its ultimate consequence, de-emphasizing the power of priests and empowering lay believers. Given its history of active involvement in the changes in discourse and practice in Dutch Catholicism both on the local and on the national level, this is not surprising. It is rewarded by the stamp of approval of many people from the local communities of Welden and surroundings; at least, they have ‘gone with the times’.

Religion, moral orientation and practice

On a more practical level, it seems that this renegotiated boundary took shape through the reorganization of local church life and the role of the priest. To my surprise, the most vivid memories concerning changes in the church among the older generation turned out to be of the lifting of the obligation to go to church and confession, and the evidence that many of the clergy themselves openly challenged their vows of celibacy. This had far-reaching consequences as was explained in Chapter 3. For one thing, the lifting of the obligation to go to church meant that in principle everybody could start living to his or her own rhythm and ‘needs’. Rather than the church identifying the need for people to be uplifted and cleansed spiritually, the discourse of progressive Catholicism assumed that people would start identifying this need themselves. And apparently, they needed the church less than the church used to think people needed it. Instead of an omnipresent institution, it became a building you could choose to enter or not.

It also radically undermined the plausibility of the obligations the church used to place on people: if everything could suddenly be done differently, why had they tried so hard to be good Catholics? Was it all for nothing? ‘Did they just lie to us?’ The pre-war generation resolved this issue in most cases with the motto that had served them well in all conflicts with the clergy even before ‘they’ changed everything: ‘you do not go for the priest, you go for God’.

Nowadays, the place of the church in individual and community life is still firmly connected to a view on tradition and culture, on being a Limburger, as was discussed above. To choose not to do the life cycle rituals of Catholicism could be seen as a slap in the face of the parents, a way of distancing oneself from their efforts to lead a good life and raise their children well. In this role, the Catholic Church cannot be replaced. Even to the people who visit the spiritual association, not participating in the Catholic rituals would be a significant break with the past and with local community life, with everything that is familiar and dear, that many had no intention of making. In
fact, some of the participants of the spiritual association were also active in their local parish church, helping the priest prepare for the yearly ritual of the first Holy Communion. Furthermore, the local associations (women’s association, association for the elderly, brass band, schutterij7) cherish their ‘special mass’ at Christmas and Easter or other holidays and usually protest when they are told that the priest can no longer come because of the shortage in priests. But it is as traditional, or rather habitual practices that these rituals are important, not as religious practices. But they do provide the entry-point for religious re-signification.

4. RELIGIOUS REPERTOIRES AS A SOURCE FOR MORAL ORIENTATION IN PRESENT-DAY LIMBURG

In the last two chapters, I described two religious settings and the kind of moral reasoning that goes on there in detail. It has to be noted that these two settings do not at all exhaust the possibilities for finding religious ‘inspiration’ in Limburg. However, they do represent two popular and common discourses.

Strangely, they seem almost diametrically opposed in terms of beliefs: one is abstract and metaphorical in the way it refers to the transcendent, the other is particular and literal. Nevertheless, in both contexts, the discourse can be interpreted in part as an answer to the question: what does the scientifically ‘correct’, modernist worldview say about how we should live? In the pastoral centre, the answer is: nothing. Science does not answer questions of meaning, of how to make sense of life, of what is good and true. We still need to orient ourselves with the help of the Christian tradition and the example of the life of Jesus as he practiced love in every aspect of his actions. This means that the values of inclusion and acceptance should be emphasized in all interactions. Although there is no ‘secure’ knowledge to be found about God, there is a security to be found in following the footsteps of tradition, trying to bring alive the faith in God shown by Jesus, the apostles, the saints. Uncertainty is not condemned, rather it is shown in these figures as something to identify with: they were human, like us, yet they put their trust in God. Morality cannot be deduced from ontology, rather, it can be deduced from the fundamental uncertainty of knowing God and the way one should live. Disenchantment is not denied, but rather embraced as a psychological challenge to purify one’s faith, to do away with the psychological props of a ‘literal’ belief. Uncertainty about the existence of God is sacralized by confronting it with the radical love for humankind shown by Jesus. ‘To love thy neighbour as thyself’ and show respects towards the weak and the broken despite this uncertainty shows the true miracle of faith and of Jesus’ life.

In the spiritualist group, the discourse of science is appropriated, and then elaborated in order to produce new, morally significant truths and certainties. These certainties are directly related to people’s own lives, and informed by the truths they

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7 Literally: home guard. Used to be a band of men protecting the village, nowadays its practices have been mostly ritualized.
find by observing their own emotions and bodies. Morality can be deduced from ontology, and one can navigate one’s way through life by relying on an epistemology grounded in individual subjectivity. The contingency of subjective experience is counteracted by the emphasis on ‘the other side’, which is supposed to be a reality outside the self. Many of the conversations in this spiritualist group for this reason centre on dissecting someone’s personal experience to distinguish the ‘true’ message from its subjective interpretation.

In this way, the disenchanting effect of science is counteracted and given a moral content. Spiritual development and moral reasoning can be interpreted as a negotiation of control with ‘the other side’: although the loss of loved ones and suffering in life can never be prevented, one can at least learn one’s lesson and live on in the certainty that one has progressed spiritually, a little bit closer to the light of the One that is at the end of the progression of spheres. By extending family ties to the other side, relationships ‘on this side’ are also sacralized and become potentially karmic encounters.

My emphasis on the familiar is not intended to deny that the individual subjective experience of life is more important than it used to be. However, in the contexts where I did my research it is not the ultimate authority and reference point even where it concerns alternative spiritualities and in many cases it is not used to bolster an individualistic orientation but rather to bolster an orientation that takes relationships as its most important point of reference. Alternative spiritualities become part of the world of the familiar in which ‘tradition’ ‘roots’, community and a consensus on what a ‘normal’ life should be like play an important part. The concepts of alternative spiritualities are used to signify disrupting, but always recurring life events such as the loss of a spouse; and in the narratives people create with and for each other in networks of friendship and mutual help.

An important question is how these kinds of moral reasoning interact with the wider world. In general, alternative repertoires of spirituality are becoming more and more available, and part of consumer culture. Although other scholars usually stress the intrinsic moral relativism of alternative spiritualities (e.g. Hanegraaff 1999; Heelas 1996; Sutcliffe 1995), my research inclines me to another conclusion. A part of the market of alternative spirituality is in fact based on the inclination of people to take some central concepts of alternative spirituality (such as past lives, spirit guides, angels etc.) rather literally. The fact that they offer ‘knowledge’ or information coming from a source outside the self is even the primary ‘selling point’ of many products and services on this market. This also means that the absence of authority outside the self, which Heelas sees as a defining characteristic of alternative spiritualities, should be seen in another light.

Although alternative spiritualities often emphasize holism, to the people who visit spiritualist associations and the paranormal markets, ‘the other side’ can be a very real thing that is definitely outside themselves. Reasoning intellectually, the more sophisticated practitioners might argue that the knowledge one can obtain from contact with this sphere is also within the self, but as I have shown, the behaviour of buying information on a paranormal market and the arguments exchanged in conversation in
the spiritual association are based on the assumption that it is outside the self. Although theoretically we might all be kings of our own universe, the people described in this book do not behave like that, they do not even really believe like that. They use religious repertoires to figure out the boundary between what they can control in life and in personal relationships and what they cannot control, and how they should try to control or not control things, to come to terms with suffering, conflict and loss.

For further research into alternative spiritualities, I would plead to pay less attention to the ‘intellectual’ level, and more to the dynamic and creative ways people use these alternative spiritualities. The relationship between consumer-culture and alternative spiritualities also deserves more specific attention, because it is through consumer culture that ideas from alternative spiritualities are becoming the stuff with which we think. However, this research should not stick to analysing flyers, products and mass media content but seriously involve people, particularly families and other small groups and a better grasp of differences in class and educational level among various publics.

The discourse at the pastoral centre supports and promotes a moral attitude that is more oriented towards taking and fulfilling responsibilities and serving humanity. Within the local context, it has a clear function in training volunteers. On the other hand, there is also a decisive shift to cater to the ‘spiritual turn’: people who seek out religious repertoires for personal reflection. There is a well stocked bookstore, there are reading groups, there are special ‘silence’ celebrations for people who want to take a breather from the hurried pace of daily life (although these are not very busy). Although many of the people participating in these activities are also active as volunteers, at the time of my research the emphasis seemed to be shifting from community service and service to humanity to personal spiritual wellbeing and growth.

The nature and place of present-day religion

How can we link the specifics of the south of Limburg to the general discussion on the place and nature of religion in Western European societies? In chapter 1, I cited several authors who have tried to shed light on this issue. They have pointed out the locally and historically specific nature of the process of secularization, once thought to be universal (Davie 1996). They have pointed out that secularization theory does not provide any insights into present-day religion and its relation to modern society (Hervieu-Léger 2001:120). And they point out the conditions in society that inevitably lead to religion and especially to religious experience again: the limits of a rational worldview, of rationalization, the strains of pluralization and individualization (Harskamp 2000; Heelas 2002; Heelas 1998; Hervieu-Léger 1993).

Forms of religiosity that have a strong emphasis on experience and on the body are seen as an answer to these strains, providing a plausibility that is felt and experienced rather than believed intellectually (Knibbe and Westra 2003). In connection to this emphasis on experience, the romantic tradition is seen as an important key to understanding the place and nature of present-day religion, balancing the
stereotypical view that our society has become increasingly disenchanted and rationalized since the time of the Enlightenment (Hanegraaff 1995; Taylor 1992).

These attempts to redefine the field of the study of religion can be linked to sociological views on postmodernity or high modernity such as represented in the work of Giddens, Beck and Bauman (Bauman 1996; Bauman 1997; Beck 1999; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1990). In these views, culture, religion and community are subjected to forces of fragmentation that create new circumstances and risks, reconfiguring the conditions under which people live out their lives, and changing the nature of religion. Religious repertoires are increasingly available in a disembedded way, and people can pick and choose as if in a supermarket.

This kind of theorizing moves on a very abstract level, and the (strongly inductive) research I did is not suited to operationalizing the hypotheses embedded in this theorizing: that the conditions of present-day society influence the nature of religion in a certain way, e.g. leading to a stronger emphasis on experience and the self, the decline of traditional religions, the decline of authorities outside the self. Nevertheless, the interpretative descriptions presented in this book could shed some light on this debate and refine the understanding of present-day religiosity on which this debate bases itself.

First it should be noted that this research, as already indicated in the first chapter, focused on local life, and on how much of this life is still very much embedded rather than disembedded. Nevertheless, even for those who are very much locally oriented, the local parish is no longer the only option: many people choose to visit a church outside their own parish where the services and the priest are more to their liking. Religion has indeed moved ‘from obligation to consumption’ as Davie noted (Davie 2001).

Furthermore, commoditized religious repertoires also find a good market in the south of Limburg, as the success of the bookshop of the pastoral centre and that of numerous other bookstores in the surrounding cities proves. However, alternative spiritualities also know a locally embedded version (the spiritual associations and their networks of magnetists, mediums and psychics) that is now being transformed through contact with globalized repertoires of alternative spirituality (New Age and neopaganism).

Catholicism is important to those who wish to perpetuate local community life. The younger generation would often formulate their commitment to Catholicism in terms of ‘despite’. In this phrase, the ambivalent outcome of the history of the Catholic Church in Limburg is implied: despite its irrelevance to the way we live, despite not setting foot inside the church often, despite not exactly knowing what it means to be a Catholic anymore, despite its tendency to lay down irrelevant rules that can no longer be enforced effectively. Despite all this, then, they still wanted to have something to do with Catholicism, creating opportunities for the pastoral centre and the diocesan to offer trainings and discussion groups to revive this dormant identity.
This implies that there are people who want to perpetuate community life, especially young parents. However, they are becoming a smaller portion of the geographic unit of a local village as the South of Limburg is becoming increasingly ‘gentrified’. ‘The local way of life’ is becoming one lifestyle among others. Slowly, people are becoming self-consciously (instead of implicitly) ‘local’. In this lifestyle the local church, preferably the local parish church, is an important focal point, linked to other local networks such as the brass band, the women’s association, the association of the elderly etc. As anthropologists have often noted, globalization and disembedding, invoke their opposites: localization and re-embedding. In the south of Limburg, women are usually the driving force of the latter process, as guardians of the domain of the familiar and primarily responsible for raising children. But the role of men is also instrumental: they are cast in the role of the handymen and financial administrators of local life.

In this locally embedded lifestyle, many of the strains of life in high modern societies are felt less. Because of the still strongly gendered division of tasks in family life, where women may have part-time jobs but do not see those jobs in terms of a career, there is less pressure on family life, and individualism is not very pronounced. Both men and women see themselves in terms of their role in family life and the local community. Neither do they experience their life as fragmented because of the many different contexts they participate in. In the pastoral centre, for example, people often participated not primarily because they were on an individual quest for meaning, but because they wanted to know more about Catholicism to be better able to perpetuate community life as parents, as teachers in the local elementary school, as nurses in an old people’s home, as parish volunteers. More personal quests for meaning were usually linked to significant life-events that are universal rather than specific to life in high modernity, such as death and illness. However, the form this personal quest takes can be seen as specific to our time and place: encounter groups and pastoral counselling. Old rituals are re-signified to meet modern needs: to show that people care, to help along the psychological dynamics of mourning.

In the spiritual association, the motivation of people to participate was also often linked with life-events and problems that are not significantly peculiar to this day and age: death, difficulties with raising children, fights within the family, illness. Because the practices of the spiritual association are very much problem-oriented, they attract more people who are looking for short-term solutions rather than long-term commitment. The short-term orientation of some of the visitors often conflicts with the aim of associations like this to encourage people to develop spiritually. According to the ‘insiders’ of this scene the interest in spiritual development is definitely growing in the South of Limburg, and the networks have become larger, more diverse, more visible and are producing more practitioners since the 1990ies.
**Spiritual revolution or moral critique of authority?**

Does this mean that there is indeed a ‘spiritual revolution’ taking place, as Heelas has predicted, as part of the ‘subjective turn’ where no authority outside the self is recognized (Heelas 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005)? In the contexts of my research, I decided that **ambivalence** towards authority was a more fitting term to describe people’s attitudes. Authority is in fact presupposed in many places: in science, in tradition, in professionals, in priests, in ‘the other side’. Many people in Welden and the surrounding villages describe themselves as ‘ordinary people’ who do not know much. It is perhaps **because** religious authority can be so powerful, and has been so powerful within living memory, that it is kept at a respectful distance. It is placed firmly in the domain of things one can not control and should not try to control in life. It is, indeed, as (neo)conservative Catholics like to believe, perceived as unchangeable.

So religious and ritual authority is a very sensitive issue and people protect the domain of the familiar against authoritarian moral judgements. The warnings that ‘it should make sense to you’ in the pastoral centre, the emotionally charged negotiations around the last rites, the behaviour of ‘buying one’s freedom’ of spiritual and religious authority can be seen in this light. They are all strategies to protect the domain of the familiar, to domesticate authority, to protect against the power to disempower that religion can have. The pastoral centre even trains its volunteers explicitly to avoid giving the impression of passing judgement. They **offer** the gospels and the Christian tradition as moral authorities rather than a priest whose role it is to ‘think for’ his flock. There is a strong taboo on moralising and the language of the pastoral centre is painstakingly politically correct and inclusive.

In contrast, moralising in the Spiritual Association is very intrusive. Add to this the claim that mediums and psychics pass on ‘messages from the other side’ and the picture that no authority but that of the self is recognized becomes mere rhetoric. The intrusive moralising and ‘absoluteness’ of the pronouncements of the mediums are softened by the fact that the atmosphere of the Spiritual Association is very familiar and scepticism towards mediums and psychics is presupposed. Some regulars, in fact, give the impression that they have already been sceptic for years, but that they keep coming because they like the atmosphere and have developed friendships with the other members. Authority and the abuse of power is routinely and openly criticized, not by referring to the ultimate authority of the self, but by referring to the relative spiritual development of the medium or psychic in question.

As I have suggested in the previous chapters, the thesis that an emphasis on the authority of the self is characteristic of alternative spiritualities is probably the result of an over-emphasis in research so far on the emic literature rather than on practice: in terms of doctrine, indeed, most alternative spiritualities, thought through to their ultimate conclusion, do lead to the insight that there is no authority outside the self. However, a focus on behaviour and practices shows that people in fact recognize a (transcendent) authority outside themselves, and that they suppose that this authority
can intervene in people’s lives. Even when they are sceptic, they at least want to know more about it to be able to decide whether they should recognize it. They consider it a possibility.

Nevertheless, it is significant that both the pastoral centre and the spiritual association see the subjective as the primary site for creating plausibility. Being a believer is not a matter of accepting certain truths on the authority of a text or a person, but of learning. In both contexts, people evaluate other people in terms of what they ‘already’ or ‘not yet’ understand. But the way this task is approached is fundamentally different. The pastoral centre, as I noted above, starts where science and common sense stop. They explicitly base their discourse on uncertainty, tradition and practical example. To create faith, they address the individual to recognize and accept the fundamental uncertainty of a belief in God and while whisking away this support to faith, they quickly offer another: the tradition and practical example of Jesus, the saints and ‘good people’ in general in whose footsteps one can follow. People who believe ‘literally’ are judged to be psychologically ‘not yet ready’ to do without the psychological prop of an actual God, angels, heaven etc.. Embodied experience and emotions play only a very small role in the creating of plausibility. Rather, they teach people to think until the unthinkable, and believe beyond that, because recognising the love of God as shown by Jesus will lead one to lead a more ethical life.

The spiritual association, in contrast, bases itself on certainty: the existence of the other side can be proven, and subjective experience is a site for ‘fact finding’. You don’t need to believe, you should just wait and see and piece things together gradually. One should learn to distinguish between subjective distortions and objective facts coming from ‘the other side’. Those who do not see this are ‘not yet ready’ to accept the evidence of their own senses, preferring to shrug it off as dreams, a spell of dizziness, strange fancies. The subjective experience of plausibility is coached through suggestions such as ‘open yourself to the Light’.

This means that in both contexts, plausibility is explicitly acknowledged as a challenge and a task. Religious authority, in order to inspire ‘real’ belief rather than the automatic Catholicism that comes with being a Limburger or the freely ‘browsing’ attitude of religious consumers, has to overcome certain challenges. One of these is science and ‘secular’ common sense. The other is the ambivalent attitude to authority of people in the south of Limburg. The habitus of not contradicting authority is stronger in Limburg than in the North of the Netherlands where Protestantism has promoted a culture of arguing every point. This habitus of not contradicting authority is connected to the tendency to avoid and ignore authority, to keep you head down, to plug your ears during mass, and to criticize and ridicule people in authority viciously when they are out of earshot. The spiritual association circumvents the ambivalence towards authority by creating familiarity, the pastoral centre by being very flexible and inclusive in language and practices, and promoting open dialogues.

This ambiguity towards authority is particularly strong in Limburg, but it seems to me that religions in Western European societies face the same challenge: in
most societies, Christianity (which to many people still represents the model for other ‘religions’) in its various forms is often associated with an authoritarian past and has to find a way to deal with this. Of course, this can also be an asset to attract those people who feel that ‘things have gone too far’ but in Limburg there were not many people who were keen to return to the days where the priest could make or break your life in conjunction with the mayor. The challenge of science is also not particular to Limburg, but is felt by many religious traditions. In most Western European societies, traditional religions are associated with beliefs that are contradicted by science, despite all the adjustments they have made to accommodate scientific insights.

Alternative spiritualities, whether in their more ‘literal’ form or in the highly abstract form that attracts more highly educated people, are supremely able to deal with these challenges. They are inherently critical of authoritarianism. In fact, they do not even want to call themselves ‘religions’ the better to explicitly distance themselves from the authoritarian associations of religion. They actually use science to reinforce their claims, rather than feeling challenged by it. Furthermore, they focus on specific problems and providing solutions rather than on conversion and salvation, circumventing the association with gloom and doom of the traditional religions.

A peculiarly modern need for religion?
The challenges that shape present-day religiosity in Limburg can be analysed as arising out of the particular history of ideas of Western Europe rather than as related to a deeply felt need arising out of the conditions of (high) modernity as Van Harskamp, Hervieu-Léger, Berger and Bauman speculate: the pluralization of lifeworlds by which individual subjective experience is left as the only possible locus of anchoring plausibility (see chapter 1, section 3). This does not mean that these conditions do not shape present-day religiosity at all, on the contrary. But not in the South of Limburg and probably not for many other people leading more or less ‘ordinary’ lives, following the footsteps of their parents while at the same time improving on that life.

Clearly, the challenges of its relation to certain aspects of culture shared by most Western European societies, shapes the nature of present-day religiosity. Every contemporary citizen, whether in Limburg or in London or in Oslo, will meet the story of Genesis that God created the world in 7 days with the same disbelief. But these challenges do not determine the place of religiosity in Limburg in particular or Western European societies in general. And it is by looking at the place of religion in social life that we can see what needs it actually meets. I have already exhaustively located religion in Limburg in the previous sections of this chapter: as part of community life, a focal point for perpetuating local communities and raising children as part of this local community, and as part of the private sphere, what I have called here the domain of the familiar, the stuff with which we think, with which we create narratives for and with each other.

Both as a local point of local life and as part of the domain of the familiar, one could see them as part of a certain lifestyle that is an option among other lifestyles.
Bauman has noted that the fact that everything is becoming a matter of choice means that no durable commitments or communities are possible anymore (Bauman 1996). However, the reality is that many people are still part of durable commitments and communities and that many people do not want to step outside those durable commitments and communities. That is in fact what they want: they choose not to break with the life their parents live, they choose to focus on the local, on the familiar, and they choose to only slightly modify traditional gendered role divisions. In many cases, this is not even a choice, but simply self-evident; alterations are seen in terms of minor improvements on the life of their parents.

In this way, they also avoid many of the stresses of high or post-modernity that are seen as producing the need for religiosity. In short: the place of present-day religion should not only be analysed as an answer to the stresses of life in high modernity, but as part of a certain lifestyle that resolves the ‘need to constitute ourselves as individuals’ (Beck 1992) in a way that builds on local history and tradition. Not alone, but in (durable) cooperation with others. This means that people’s moral orientation, rather than becoming unmoored, takes the givens of local life as a point of departure and uses the heart, the obligation to care and to nurture and protect the familiar, as its compass.