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Faith in the Familiar:
Continuity and Change in Religious Practices and Moral Orientations in the South of
Limburg, the Netherlands

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LIST OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Religion in the Netherlands between Secularization and Sacralization...... 1
  1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1
  2. Secularization theory: premises and predictions ...................................................... 2
  3. Criticisms and attempts to redefine the field .............................................................. 4
  4. The research programme ‘Between secularization and sacralization’ and the research questions of this book ......................................................................... 8
  5. An anthropological approach to religion and moral orientation .............................. 9
  6. terms and vocabularies.............................................................................................. 15
  7. Methodological notes.............................................................................................. 18
  8. Outline of the book ................................................................................................. 21

Chapter 2: Moral discourses in Dutch Catholicism: from Pillarization, via Liberation to Polarization .................................................................................................................. 22
  1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 22
  2. Catholic in everything: triumph and moral anxiety .................................................. 25
  3. From moralizing to psychologising ........................................................................... 31
  4. The local church versus papal power play .................................................................. 35
  5. Catholicism in Limburg ............................................................................................ 40
  6. Concluding remarks ................................................................................................. 44

Chapter 3: Narratives of the Past in Welden .................................................................... 47
  1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 47
  2. Representations of the past ....................................................................................... 52
  3. Changes .................................................................................................................... 58
  4. Polarization ............................................................................................................... 62
  5. Comparison of past and present .............................................................................. 66
  6. Concluding remarks ................................................................................................. 70

Chapter 4: Familiar Domains Between Secularization and Sacralization .................... 73
1. Introduction ................................................................................................................. 73
2. Rituals around death and dying ............................................................................. 74
3. The younger generation: “despite…” ................................................................. 83
4. Tangible progress .................................................................................................... 85
5. re-signification of the Catholic tradition: from Secularization to Sacralization .... 93
6. Sacralization and Consumer culture ..................................................................... 94
7. Concluding remarks ............................................................................................... 100

Chapter 5: The Spiritual association of the Hills ...................................................... 103
1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 103
2. A moral tale .............................................................................................................. 110
3. themes for moralizing ........................................................................................... 122
4. Power, Affects and Gossip .................................................................................... 127
5. Ways of believing ................................................................................................... 130
6. Concluding remarks ............................................................................................... 136

Chapter 6: The Christian Pastoral Centre ............................................................... 138
1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 138
2. The resurrection of Christ ...................................................................................... 141
3. The burden of the past ........................................................................................... 148
4. The problem of the present ................................................................................... 151
5. Uncertainty as a moral good .................................................................................. 155
6. Gossip and stereotyping ......................................................................................... 159
7. Concluding remarks ............................................................................................... 161

Chapter 7: in conclusion ............................................................................................ 164
1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 164
2. The five themes ....................................................................................................... 166
3. Changing religious practices and moral orientations as a renegotiation of domains ................................................................................................. 172
4. Religious repertoires as a source for moral orientation in present-day Limburg... 176
CHAPTER 1: RELIGION IN THE NETHERLANDS BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND SACRALIZATION

1. INTRODUCTION

The PhD research of which this dissertation is the result was part of the larger research programme ‘Between Secularization and Sacralization’ (BSS) of the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. This programme intended to do qualitative research on religion in the Netherlands. Dissatisfaction with current research on religion in the Netherlands formed the background of this programme. Most research on religion in the Netherlands focused on the statistics of the decline in churchgoing; a decline that set in during the sixties and has not stopped since (e.g. Becker 2000; Becker 1994; Dekker 1997; Grootenhuis and Schepers 2001). In the space of fifty years, the Netherlands as a society has moved from a situation where everything was organized around a particular denomination or worldview, to a detraditionalized, secularized and pluralistic society.

So evidently, religion plays a smaller role in the organization of society. At the same time, it is becoming more and more obvious that the classical secularization theories, which posited religion as incompatible with modernity, could not adequately account for the persistence of religion: outside the walls of the traditional institutions, religious repertoires were flourishing, and inside the walls of these institutions, new developments were making the accepted social science conceptions of religion and its place in society problematic. Also, only a small minority of Dutch people described themselves as atheists, while belief in an afterlife and other ‘religious’ concepts was rising again and people seem to attach more importance to ‘faith’ (Becker, Hart et al. 1997:178; Dekker 1997: 27-28, 41). These developments were not confined to the Netherlands, but could also be observed in other Western European countries (e.g. Dobbelaeere and Voyé 1990; Fontaine, Duriez et al. 2002; Hervieu-Léger 1993; Lambert 2004). It seemed that parallel to the process of secularization, a trend towards sacralization could be observed (compare Harskamp 2000; Heelas 1996; Woodhead and Heelas 2000:429-476). In the BSS programme, several researchers using qualitative methods worked in different places at more or less the same time to get a better grip on the nature and place of religion in the Netherlands.

The research on which this dissertation is based took place in the southern part of the Province of Limburg, the Netherlands, in a rural area that in some ways is becoming a suburb to the nearby cities; in other ways has a distinctly different character. Limburg, and to a lesser extent the province of Brabant, used to be dominated by the Catholic church, in contrast to the rest of the Netherlands, where Protestantism has historically been more dominant (Knippenberg 1992:1). Today, about one third of the Dutch population is nominally Catholic but in Limburg this percentage is much higher and in many ways, ‘being Catholic’ is entwined with ‘being a Limburger’ which in turn means: being different from the rest of the Netherlands. My research focused on the changing religious practices and moral orientations in the south of Limburg.
This chapter shows the background of the research programme as a whole and the specific background of my research. In sections 2 and 3, I summarize the discussion on the place of religion in present-day Northwestern European societies and the emerging insights that informed our line of questioning in the programme as a whole. The research programme itself is described in section 4. In section 5 I explore some of the core concepts of my research: religion and culture, processes of signification and practice, moral orientation and the terms I use to describe the findings of my research, while section 6 explains the terms and vocabularies I use in my descriptions. In section 7, the actual fieldwork and methodology is described. The final section of this chapter gives an outline of the rest of the book.

2. SECULARIZATION THEORY: PREMISES AND PREDICTIONS

There are many different secularization theories that have all been fine-tuned in various ways. Here I will only sketch some of the basic premises that characterize the debate on secularization, and have set the terms by which present day religiosity is still considered. In brief, secularization is usually taken to refer to ‘...a process of transfer of property, power, activities and both manifest and latent function, from institutions with a super naturalist frame of reference to (often new) institutions operating according to empirical, rational pragmatic criteria’ (Wilson 1985:12). Generally, it indicates the loss of power of religion in societies. Theories of secularization often include the implicit assumption that this also implies a ‘secularization of consciousness’ (a decline in religious beliefs) related to a decline in church-going, or at best, relegates religion to the role of private preference.

The early Peter Berger makes this assumption explicit. In his influential book ‘The Sacred Canopy’, he interpreted secularization as arising out of the tendency of monotheistic religions to simplify, codify and unify their bodies of beliefs, in short: to rationalize them in order to make the world a more predictable place, susceptible to human understanding (Berger 1967). The differentiation of society arising out of the advance of technology and capitalism furthermore results in a pluralization of life worlds. It is especially this pluralization that Peter Berger saw as the cause of the secularization of consciousness (i.e. a decline in adherence to religious beliefs and practices).

He saw the mechanisms of this link between pluralization and secularization as follows: First, because of the confrontation of the different life worlds, it becomes clear that different ways of life and valuation are possible. This realization will become part of everyday consciousness. This means that religious worlds lose their ‘taken for grantedness’, their plausibility. Second, the pluralization of life worlds means that the state has to become a neutral entity, and this demand for neutrality is gradually extended to other institutions in the public sphere as well. With the secularization of the
public sphere, the day to day reinforcement of the religious tradition disappears, which in turn means a lesser internalization of religion (Berger 1967:150-151).\(^1\)

In this theory, the secularization of society and secularization of consciousness are inextricably linked to each other. The ‘causal mechanism’ the early Berger extrapolated to make his predictions is that when social structures and organization become more secular, religion loses its plausibility. In later years, Berger refuted his thesis (see Bruce in Woodhead, Heelas et al. 2001:87-101 for a defence of the early Berger, against the later Berger himself!). But in the ‘Sacred Canopy’ he still stated confidently:

‘One may say, with only some exaggeration, that economic data on industrial productivity or capital expansion can predict the religious crisis of credibility in a particular society more easily than data from a “history of ideas” of that society’ (Berger 1967:151).

Until recently, it was very much part of the thinking among social scientists to assume that the whole world was becoming increasingly industrialized, capitalist, rationalized, and therefore secularized.

In Dutch research, the general outline of Peter Berger’s secularization theory has been followed and tested by looking at the numbers of church-going people and the number of people subscribing to the ‘orthodox’ Christian articles of faith in several large-scale researches that have been repeated since 1966 (Becker 2000; Becker 1994; Dekker 1997). In these researches, the conclusion is obvious: the Netherlands is indeed one of the most secular countries in the world in terms of church affiliations, attendance and adherence to ‘traditional’ articles of faith. At the same time, these researches also show that adherence to certain beliefs has been growing again since the nineties, and many Dutch people are interested in what these researchers call ‘para-cultural phenomena’ such as Christian charismatic movements, alternative spiritualities and New Age (Becker, Hart et al. 1997:17-28). However, this has not translated into a growing membership of organizations and institutions embodying these philosophies (Becker, Hart et al. 1997:17-28). Therefore, as some scientists argue, religion is a factor that can be safely ignored as ‘private’ (Wilson 1985) or ‘residual’, bound to disappear soon after the melting away of the churches, of little significance to scientists interested in studying society (Bruce 2002).

Although later formulations of the secularization theory confine themselves more and more to the institutional level and to Western Europe, critics of the secularization thesis still mainly address themselves to the premises summarised in Wilson’s definition and the early Berger: religious institutions have relinquished their power, increasing rationalization ‘hollows out’ religion from the inside by criticizing its

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\(^1\) This is linked to his view of culture as a dialectic between internalization and externalization explicated in his work with Luckmann. (Berger and Luckmann 1966).
own claims to truth, and the differentiation of society strains the plausibility structure of religious life worlds. To this we can add the obvious, but usually implicit, assumption in many intellectual circles, often echoed in popular thought, that scientific representations of the world contradict and undermine the plausibility of religion: as science gains authority, religious authority necessarily declines.

3. CRITICISMS AND ATTEMPTS TO REDEFINE THE FIELD

In recent years, secularization theories have been subjected to a number of criticisms, and numerous attempts have been made to disprove existing secularization theories or formulate entirely new perspectives on the place of religion in Western European society, mostly in France and Britain.

Because secularization theories put the focus exclusively on religious institutions, they do not provide any insight into actual processes of change from the point of view of the people who ‘suddenly’ stay away from the church: the assumption that this has to do with a loss of plausibility à la Berger cannot be correct if people still do believe, and belief in miracles, reincarnation and an afterlife is even rising. To give but one puzzling example, among Catholics in the Netherlands, as many as 81% believed in reincarnation in 1996 but strangely, belief in the ‘traditional’ articles of faith of the Christian tradition was even lower than among the rest of the population (Dekker 1997: 57-58).

Furthermore, the meaning of the answers to the questionnaires used in statistical research confirming the secularization thesis is far from clear. In preparation of the BSS programme, an anthropologist took the questionnaire that is used to measure secularization in the Netherlands and interviewed a group of 12 people to find the reasoning behind the answers they chose from the predefined list. She found that in some cases, people gave the same answers for widely different reasons, while in other cases, people gave different answers, but showed similar reasoning (Droogers forthcoming).

And finally, if we compare the place of religion in Western European societies with its place in other societies (such as the United States) that are equally modernized and differentiated, it becomes clear that modernization, pluralization and rationalization do not necessarily predict the decline of religion. Worldwide, religions seem to increase in social relevance rather than decrease (this was already obvious before September 11, e.g. the spread of Pentecostal churches). So perhaps, rather than providing the model for developments elsewhere, the secularization of Europe should be seen as the exception (Davie 1996). The explanation for the secularization process in Western Europe would then come to lie much more in localized historical processes that cannot be extrapolated to provide a universal ‘model’ to predict developments in other societies.

In the international debate on contemporary religion, the tone is set by authors such as Grace Davie, who points to the continuing importance of religious institutions, the team Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead who published several influential books on

Davie argues that secularization should be seen in a broader perspective of social change. Rather than giving counter-examples of persisting religiosity, she shows that the decline of membership of the churches can be understood in the same light as the general decline in membership of all voluntary and civic organizations in post-war Britain. According to her, this shows that it is not a changing pattern of belief that causes 'secularization' but rather that a different pattern of belief is the consequence of a decline in church going.

She characterizes the attitude of the British towards religion as ‘believing without belonging’ (the title of one of her books (Davie 1994)). At the same time, people do care about the continued existence of the churches, which is why she introduces the term ‘vicarious religion’: a small core of committed believers are supported by large sections of society (Davie 2001:106). Attitudes towards religion move from ‘obligation’ to ‘consumption’: ‘The congregations who derive their strength from consumption- i.e. this is something that I choose to do (maybe regularly, maybe not, sometimes for long periods, sometimes for short)- display close similarities to the leisure pursuits of the secular world’ (Davie 2001:106). At the same time, religious beliefs may actually thrive and develop in unexpected directions as the hold of orthodox religions on religious beliefs declines (Davie 2002:333).

Hervieu-Léger summarizes the failings of the secularization thesis as follows:

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

Attempts to redefine the terms of the debate on religious studies have pointed in two directions: (1) the limits of the disenchantment and differentiation caused by rationalization and (2) the significance of individualization (as the dominant mode of structuring societies, redefining the place of religion in social life like rationalization has redefined it) and individualism (as a complex of cultural values and beliefs). The first direction is suggested by Hervieu-Léger, but also by authors such as Zygmunt Bauman and Van Harskamp: perhaps the rationalism that has driven modernization has exhausted itself, and runs into the contradictions that although it undermines the plausibility of all attempts to formulate ultimate answers, it cannot give ultimate answers itself (Bauman 1998; Harskamp 2000; Hervieu-Léger 1990). In this way Hervieu-Léger attempts to understand why highly educated French are attracted to emotional forms of Christian religiosity such as Pentecostalism: this kind of religiosity bases itself
on an experiential reality rather than on verbalized propositions about the nature of the world and man’s place in it (Hervieu-Léger 1993).

This argument follows the same general line of thought as the argument developed by Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, in a book written after the tumultuous final years of the sixties. In this book they suggested that the anonymity, bureaucratization and alienating characteristics of modernity lead people to feel ‘homeless’ and to turn towards the only coherent source of meaning left to them: their own subjectivity (Berger, Berger et al. 1977 [1973]). Heelas’ thesis that individual experience, a focus on the self, is becoming the paramount locus of anchoring values and cosmologies that attempt to give answers to ultimate questions also runs parallel to this line of thinking. He calls this the ‘spiritual revolution’, linked to a wider ‘subjective turn’ in Western European culture (Heelas 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2001; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Spiritualities recognizing no ultimate authority but that of the self, he predicts, might even begin to replace religion, which he associates with an emphasis on a transcendent authority.

Like Hervieu-Léger, Van Harskamp explicitly argues the position that modernity or post-modernity actually ‘produces’ the need for religion (Harskamp 2000 chapter 2). The fragmenting forces of the rationalization and individualization of society on any kind of coherent plausibility structure, result in the shift of the locus of plausibility and legitimation from authoritative texts and religious experts to experience. This ties in with the theorizing on the impact of individualization on society by authors such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim: through individualization, the way it organizes society, we are forced to constitute ourselves as individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:4). This, in turn, entails a deroutinization of life. One is no longer born into a certain collectivity with all the routines, opportunities and scripts for behaviour this entails. Rather people have to create their own ‘do-it-yourself-biographies’. Lifestyle becomes a choice, the smallest: details in life become of the greatest importance. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim ‘[o]ne can even say that decisions about lifestyle are “deified”’. Questions that went out of use with God are re-emerging at the centre of life. Everyday life is being post-religiously “theologized” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:7).

It is this necessity to constitute oneself as an individual that, according to Van Harskamp, gives rise to ‘the painful question of the self’: there is a collective urge to find our authentic and individual self, to figure out who we essentially are, in order to know what to do, how to plan our lives, how to direct ourselves: only in this way can we hope to find an anchor for the different worlds in which we live, in the speeding up of time, among all the changes taking place around us’ (Harskamp 2000:237, my translation).

In our joint MA thesis, Iti Westra and I argue that the sudden phenomenal success of the spiritualist medium Jomanda2 in the Netherlands can be similarly

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2 Jomanda is the pseudonym of Joke Damman. She drew crowds of thousands of people to her ‘healing services’ in the early nineties, hoping for miracles. At the time she generated much
understood as an attempt to create plausibility based on the personal experience of a transcendent reality that interferes directly into people’s lives (Knibbe and Westra 2001; Knibbe and Westra 2003). However, because of Jomanda’s emphasis on the factual nature of transcendent reality her case does not easily fit into the development of a spiritual revolution as sketched by Heelas and Van Harskamp. Although there is a strong emphasis on subjective experience, in the context of Jomanda’s healings this is taken to indicate a ‘factual’ transcendent reality ‘out there’ while according to Heelas, the emphasis on a transcendent reality and authority should be expected to decrease. In some of the findings of this research as well, there is an uneasy fit with the ‘subjective turn’ as described by Heelas. This will be elaborated in chapter 5.

Supporting the trend in theorising where present-day forms of religiosity are seen as inextricably linked to individualization and individualism, is the increase in moral individualism that can be observed in statistical trends, which seems to be linked to detraditionalization and secularization (e.g. Halman, Heunks et al. 1987). It is even more directly borne out by a statistical analysis of data pertaining to the Dutch case testing whether ‘rationalism’ or rather ‘individualism’ better explains a drawing away from traditional religion and an attraction to New Age (Houtman and Mascini 2002). Surprisingly, it was found that ‘rationalism’ and adherence to traditional religion actually go together quite well, whereas a higher score on individualism was positively correlated to an interest in New Age. This directly contradicts the popular assumption that faith in science automatically results in a loss of plausibility of the traditional religious worldviews.

Other authors suggest that in understanding present-day religiosity, especially the apparent link between individualism and an interest in alternative spiritualities, the historical contribution of the Romantic tradition should be recognized to a greater degree. As Hanegraaff shows, many present day forms of alternative spiritualities can be understood as a transformation of the esoteric tradition in Western Europe, inspired by the Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment (Hanegraaff 1995; Hanegraaff 1999). Charles Taylor, in his monumental work on ‘sources of the self’, has also argued convincingly that our present day value-orientations are to a great extent indebted to the Romantic tradition (Taylor 1992).

Apart from these theories on how the nature of present-day society impacts on religious content and form, the anthology compiled by Woodhead and Heelas deserves discussion: her sudden popularity surprised and shocked intellectuals who derided her for ‘taking advantage’ of the desperation of ill and unhappy people and as a sign of the increasing presence of irrational alternative spiritualities.

It should be noted that the authors use the term rationalization and individualisation, but since these two terms pertain to patterns of belief and moral convictions, and not to the structuring of society usually associated with the terms rationalisation and individualisation, I prefer to use the terms ‘rationalism’ and ‘individualism’. 
mention here. In it they have compiled summaries and excerpts of texts on the many forms of religiosity in the western world. In giving this overview, they have also created a typology with sub typologies (based on the substance of beliefs). Basically, they distinguish three types of religiosity: religions of difference, emphasizing the transcendent, religions of humanity emphasizing a belief in the basic goodness of humans and spiritualities of life who see the sacred in the self and in nature (Woodhead and Heelas 2000). In my research, all three types are represented in some way.

Summing up the broader discussion within which this research locates itself, we can conclude that the theories developed to explain secularization provide little insight into how to interpret the developments taking place with regard to religion in present-day societies of North-western Europe. Attempts to redefine the field of the study of religion have interpreted present-day religiosity as a ‘post-secularization’ phenomenon, the product of the same processes that caused secularization in the first place (pluralization, individualization and rationalization). To understand the nature of contemporary religiosity they also point out the importance of the complex of values summed up in individualism, and its link to the Romantic tradition and the general subjective turn in western cultures.

4. THE RESEARCH PROGRAMME ‘BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND SACRALIZATION’ AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS OF THIS BOOK

In the BSS programme, the intention was to use qualitative methods to be able to focus on the agency of individuals and groups as producers and reproducers of meaning, rather than survey methods as in previous researches. What is secularization exactly in terms of the changes in shared cultural ideas of people at the level of local communities? What does secularization mean in the lives of individual persons, communities, what does it mean for the way people deal with questions of meaning, morality and identity now? And if we live in a secular society, why are religious repertoires flourishing? How should we interpret the fact that most people say they are not atheists, and are interested in alternative spiritualities? How should we interpret the growing trend towards evangelicalization in protestant churches? Why do so many Dutch people call themselves Catholic, even though they do not subscribe to the doctrines of the Vatican and are even less orthodox in their beliefs than the general Dutch population? And if it is true that religion does not give direction and moral orientation anymore, how do people orient themselves?

Within the programme, there were 5 researches, done by different researchers. The different researches each took a different aspect of religion as its main theme: ritual, experience, morality, language and identity. The research on ritual focused on the developments in two protestant churches in a fast growing commuter town in the middle of the Netherlands. This research was first started as the PhD project of Ronald Schouten. He was diagnosed with terminal cancer soon after the project started and sadly died too young. His project was taken over by Peter Versteeg who also conducted the research on experience. In this research he studied Christian spirituality in several
spiritual centres with a congregational background (Versteeg 2003; Versteeg 2006). The research on language, a PhD project by Rhea Hummel, investigates the use of worldview vocabularies by artists. The research on identity by Els Jacobs focused on issues of identification and difference in an ecumenical church in a post-war neighbourhood. Finally, the research I did took ‘morals’ as its main theme.

The main questions of this dissertation all depart from the acknowledgement that the place and character of religion have undergone a rapid change in the years since World War II, but that religion is all but disappearing.

Summarising, the main question is this:

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

- What are the discourses that have shaped the religious landscape in Limburg, specifically the discussions on morals in Dutch Catholicism since World War II?
- 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?
- 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?
- How do specific locally embedded religious discourses shape the way people orient themselves and how do people approach these discourses?

In the next sections of this chapter, I will explore the anthropological approach to religion and ‘morals’, and the reasons behind my choice of the south of Limburg as a research area. This will lead to a general description of the terms and concepts used in these research questions and in the rest of this book.

5. **AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGION AND MORAL ORIENTATION**

In the original formulation of the research program, practices of signification were taken to be the main focus in order to gain more insight into present day religiosity in the Netherlands. The term ‘practice’ refers to an approach in anthropology that tries to go beyond the usual dichotomies in scientific theory, whereby social and cultural reality are ‘explained’ either by referring to structure, or by a focus on the individual and his or her motives. Influential in developing this approach have been Pierre Bourdieu, and for anthropology, Sherry Ortner (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990; Ortner 1984). By focusing on signification as a practice, this approach tries to do justice to the agency and intentionality of individuals, as well as to the fact that this practice always takes place within an already given context. In other words: although on the one hand, people are

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4 Publications about the other researches will be forthcoming.
the product of their socialization and culture, on the other hand they are also active shapers of shared cultural ideas. Below, this understanding of signification as a practice will be further elaborated by focusing on the key themes of the research: morals and religion.

The nature of culture: how to study religion and moral orientation

To study ‘morals’ might at first glance seem to be an old fashioned choice of focus. Older ethnographies often claim to describe ‘the morals and customs of tribe X’. In present-day anthropological language, ‘morals’ usually do not have a separate place as a topic. This does not mean that anthropology does not have anything to say about it. Rather, if culture is taken as a way of making sense of the world, shared among a group of people, any anthropological understanding of culture already implies an understanding of morality.

This link between ‘morals’ and culture can be found explicitly in Clifford Geertz’ ‘Interpreting Cultures’ (Geertz 1993 [1973]). In this publication he famously conceived of humans as ‘beings suspended in a web of meanings they themselves have spun’. Shared meanings are ‘stored’ in symbols that sum up ‘everything the groups of people familiar with those symbols know about the way the world is, the sort of emotional life it supports, and the way one ought to behave’ (Geertz 1993 [1973]:127).

This means that from a position within interpretative cultural anthropology, moral values and other culturally shared ‘meanings’ cannot be seen as separate ‘things’. The way people make sense of the world and their own role in it logically precedes their thinking about right and wrong. This is also argued by Ortner in her essay on key symbols: a particular presentation of a situation already suggests the right way to act (Ortner 2002 [1973]).

The understanding of processes of signification with which I approached the subject of present day religion and moral orientation has furthermore been influenced by phenomenological anthropology\(^3\) and Bourdieu. Phenomenological anthropology points out that embodied practice and routines are experienced as meaningful in themselves, and are not necessarily part of some greater symbolic scheme governed by abstract principles (Jackson 1989; Jackson 1996; Jackson 1998; Stoller 1989). In reaction to structuralism, Bourdieu has also argued for the importance of embodied action as explaining the way people order their world: ‘each use of one of these pairs of oppositions, KK] is only meaningful in relation to a universe of practice which is different each time, usually implicit, and always self-sufficient, ruling out the possibility of comparison with other universes’ (Bourdieu 1977:122).

\(^3\) Note that phenomenological anthropology has quite different assumptions about how to study human signification than does the phenomenological study of religion such as exemplified by Van der Leeuw.
According to Bourdieu, social interaction is characterized by both freedom and constraint: people can improvise, but there is a basic regularity in social life, the givens of the social and material world upon which they improvise and that inform signification and practice. The reproducing of regular features of the social world depends on both conscious and unconscious processes of signification. From a practice approach it is clear that a statement of fact, such as ‘he is the father’ is in practice, within the context in which it is made, actually already a statement about what this particular person should do and normally does: take up his responsibility as a father along the general lines of the way it has always been done, most appropriate within that particular context of routines and practices. However, this ‘program’ for what a father should do is reinterpreted every time anew as well. Although philosophers might argue for centuries about what it is exactly that a father should do, and especially for what reasons, people in their everyday lives already find their own answers to this question by simply doing it.

The anthropological study of religious practices and moral orientations therefore, only takes the study of abstract systems of meaning as its subject through the actual symbols, rituals, processes of signification and practices it informs and produces. To study the workings of religion, the role it plays in making sense of the world and therefore in moral orientation, we should focus on the way it is routinized and forms the basis for improvisation, part of the daily practices of people.

In contemporary anthropology, meanings are not seen as necessarily fixed and stable, or even consistent from one moment to the next, and the narratives created for the benefit of the researcher are not unproblematically taken to be a reliable representation of what people do. Rather, ‘meaning making’ is regarded as an ongoing process that should be understood from within the practical context and routines of people’s lives. It is very questionable to relate religiosity in all cases to an underlying abstraction that is part of a bigger metaphysic or a dynamic between opposites such as that supposed in structuralism (see also Jackson 1989:122). From such a perspective, religion as a coherent system of beliefs might be of only marginal interest in understanding present day religion, because the routines abstract religious belief systems have produced may mean something entirely different to those who employ these routines and carry them out than was meant by the designers.

This is much more difficult than it might seem to be at first glance. To scientists trained to recognize logic and coherence and to organize their own thought this way, it is often easiest to focus on a description of the abstract system of beliefs and religious concepts. They tend to select informants that are able to explain the logic and coherence of a worldview best. It is much more difficult for them to make sense of forms of religiosity that do not seem to tie in with such a system, so they are often called ‘irrational’, ‘primitive’, ‘folk’ or ‘residual’ religiosity, or as meaningless routines. Furthermore, the possible discrepancy between what people say and what they do is ignored.
To sum up: moral orientation cannot be separated from the way people make sense of the world and the way they move around in it. Religion and worldview should be studied as part of processes of signification that are part of a particular universe of practice. The ‘logic’, relevance and meaning of religion might lie not only on the level of abstract ideas, but should be interpreted as part of a world of practices and routines.

However, all these considerations are still too general to narrow down the subject of this book: religious practices and moral orientation.

*What is religious about religion?*

How can we understand ‘processes of signification’, not only as a practical way of reflecting on and grasping reality, but especially as what is usually seen as ‘religious’ meaning making?

An anthropological critique of ‘religion’, ‘the religious’ or ‘religiosity’ would first problematize whether these terms refer to a universal category or characteristic of humanity, and point out that in many societies, religion cannot be distinguished from general ways of ordering the world, that the distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ is not universal either, as well as the distinction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘supernatural’ (e.g. Asad 2002 [1993]; see also Bauman 1998:56-58).

To give a simple example: we believe that germs cause illness, whereas other people might believe spirits cause illness. Most people have seen neither, yet we tend to see a belief in spirits as supernatural, whereas to the people who believe in them it may be just as ‘natural’ as our belief in germs, because their experts can see spirits just like our experts can see germs. Or to put it the other way around: we would find it very inappropriate if other people would classify our belief in germs as a religious phenomenon because most people have never seen them. The very term religion is itself dependent on the ways of classifying reality prevalent in the context where it is used.

Therefore, from an anthropological perspective it makes more sense not to see ‘religion’ as a universal category*: at least in the sense of a system of beliefs pointing to the sacred or the transcendent it can only refer to a localized identification of a phenomenon. In the research presented here, I have used the term religion in this way: as something set apart by Dutch society as different from common sense notions about the world because it uses transcendent explanations to make sense of life, the world, death, etcetera’. Religion involves ‘beliefs’ that go beyond common sense. Of course, staying close to the ‘emic’ definition of religion is the easy way out. But from the

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* But see Hervieu-Léger for a very interesting suggestion on how to identify what is ‘religious’ about religion (Hervieu-Léger 2000)

* See also Robertson’s account of how the concept of religion arose as a separate category in Western cultures (Robertson 1993)
theoretical perspective and thematic interests outlined here, it is not very relevant to
develop an ‘etic’, more universally applicable concept of religion.

Nevertheless, we might identify a dynamic of balancing between certainties
and uncertainties that is basic to human meaning making. As Jackson expresses it:

‘...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).

According to Jackson, constitutive to all human action is this balancing between the
domains one can control, and those one cannot control, and the negotiation of the
boundaries between those domains.

Logically, it follows that implicitly and explicitly, ontologies and epistemologies
play a big role in this negotiation: to be able to decide what is within or outside one’s
control one needs knowledge about the world, its nature, the way it works, the limits of
human action and power, and the extent of the power of other people, institutions and
Gods. According to Bauman religiosity is, ‘after all, nothing else but the intuition of the
limits to what we, the humans, being humans, may do and comprehend’(Bauman

In the interpretations presented in this book, I have expanded on the basic
intuition of Jackson of human meaning making as a balancing act to encompass the
many daily acts of moral orientation and the role of religion, power and authority in
these acts. For example, the implicit ontologies and epistemologies that arise out of the
balancing between the two domains (the domain where one knows how to control
things, and the domain of things outside one’s control) as described by Jackson in turn
inform the exercise of power and authority. One needs authority to influence or force
others to agree with one’s understanding of the world, to be able to communicate and
act together. The negotiation of the ‘how’ (how people can and should control or not
control events, things, people etc.) is often as much an issue and a source of signification,
and forms the basis for moral orientation as well. In the following chapter we will see
that the ‘how’ sometimes bypasses questions of ontology and cosmology, sometimes
even informs them rather than a particular ontology informing people how they should
act, ideas of how people should act inform ontology.

In these negotiations, all the questions that religions have traditionally
specialized in play a role: death, evil, misfortune. When is something befalling you
caused by evil, when is it misfortune? How can we prevent it from happening to us?
What happens after death, and how should we value life if it is bound to end? These are
the kinds of questions the discourses we label as ‘religious’ are concerned with.
However, the most powerful producer of ‘certainties’ and secure knowledge in modern times is science. In chapters 5 and 6 it becomes evident how the certainties and uncertainties of science influence the delineation of domains in which religious ‘balancing-acts’ take place.

Although the delineation between certainties and uncertainties can be seen as an ongoing activity, this does not mean that we should assume that people are constantly aware of the kind of ultimate questions formalized religions try to answer: as long as their habitual practices and attitudes are sufficient to address the daily problems of life, there is no need to dive beneath the surface to take a look at its foundations of these habitual practices and attitudes. For many people, it is only at times of crisis that the self-perpetuating nature of the daily making sense of things might be called into question. At a time like that, ultimate questions may become a concern, and may prompt people to reflect on them and formulate answers. Again, from a practice approach it is questionable whether these answers will become a part of a coherent ‘theology’ that informs all of life. Therefore, it is all the more important to situate interpretations of present-day religiousity and moral orientation within an understanding of the social structures and processes that shape the world people live in.

Social change

In the BSS program, it was part of our understanding that with the increasing availability of different repertoires of meaning through books and other media, practices of signification can take on different dimensions, and become disembedded from local contexts. Present-cay religion is often described in terms of a supermarket, where people are free to pick and choose as they like. With secularization the churches loose their power to define worldviews, the ‘Sacred Canopy’ is torn, authority becomes dispersed, and religion is privatised. At the same time, morality has lost its moorings, everything is until further notice, nothing obligates anymore, there are no lasting commitments or life-long projects. As Bauman asks: ‘is there a future left for morality in a world populated by vagabonds desperate for the cosiness of tribal campfires and the tourist amused by the display of entertaining tribal customs?’ (Bauman 1996:57)

Without denying the importance of these processes, they might distract us from noticing the embeddedness of much of contemporary social life, especially outside the urban areas such as Limburg, and how recognizably local horizons of meaning are maintained and valued. It is only certain people who have been turned into the ‘vagabonds’ and tourists Bauman describes, always on the move, avoiding all moral proximity with the people actually living in the worlds they move through.

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*The terms embedded and disembedded are used here in the way Giddens uses them to describe how social systems arise from the local, but become increasingly disconnected from local circumstances (Giddens 1990).
In this book I will argue that the ‘persistence of religion’ cannot be understood without looking at: this embeddedness and the importance people attach to it. The emphasis on the local in my research is partly a reaction to the kind of speculative theorizing about the conditions of high or post modernity that sometimes dominate the debates on present day religion, represented by Heelas, Hervieu Léger, Bauman and Van Harskamp in the summary above (Bauman 1997; Bauman 2001; Harskamp 2000; e.g. Heelas 1998; Hervieu-Léger 1993).

It always struck me that I could recognize a lot of this theorizing with regard to my own environment, as a university student and researcher in Amsterdam. We might experience the world as fragmented and precarious, deroutinized to such an extent that questions about the meaning of life pop up in the most banal circumstances (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:7). We might consider different religious options as part of a religious supermarket where one can freely choose, or even as an arbitrary ‘jumble’ of signs and symbols leading to radical doubt and ontological insecurity. But this description did not apply at all to the kind of people I know in the village in Limburg where I grew up, or the villages in the same province where a part of my family lives.

Is it really logical to suppose that our whole society is evolving towards a resemblance of the image of highly educated urban dwellers? Are we all relentlessly thrown back upon our own subjectivity as the only ground for making sense of the world? As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim admit, individualization presupposes urbanization, and developments in rural areas might well follow a different logic. ‘...Lifestyles and attitudes from the town are spreading to the country - but refractedly, with a different gloss’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:5). I hoped that an anthropological approach might reveal why these theories squared so uneasily with what I knew of my home province, to discover what this ‘different gloss’ meant in practice.

Furthermore, although authority might be dispersed, that does not mean that ‘anything goes’. First, because we can assume that many ways of making sense of the world are implicit, and therefore not bared to the corrosive effects of ‘disenchantment’ and rationalization. Second, because people are always in negotiation with each other on how to define the world, how to make sense of it. Distinguishing between sense and nonsense has not ceased because post-modern philosophers have proclaimed the end of the ‘great narratives’, the churches can no longer monopolize peoples’ worldview options and individualization has crowned us all as kings of our own universe. The question always remains what is considered knowledge and fact, and what is not, who has the authority to say this, and in what context, who has the responsibility to do something, who is supposed to be ‘in control’, and what this means for how one should act.

6. TERMS AND VOCABULARIES

Although, as explained above, moral values and morality are not the exclusive domain of religion, this research focused on changing moral orientations with specific reference
to religion. For the purpose of description here, I take religion to refer to any system or repertoire that posits a particular ontology and epistemology that is different from, or goes beyond ‘common sense’ understandings of the world, involves a belief in what, according to these common sense understandings would be called supernatural or transcendent phenomena, and infers moral values from this. This includes holistic conceptions of the world such as are current in New Age, in which a difference between the transcendent and the mundane, or the sacred and the profane, is collapsed. I choose this definition because it is descriptive and substantial rather than analytical and functionalist. After all, the aim of this book is not to develop general theories or universal concepts but to generate understanding based on in-depth qualitative research. The definition used here is self-consciously locally and historically bound because it is close to the popular usage of the term ‘religion’ in Western societies, as it arose out of the confrontation between religious institutions and intellectual critiques of these institutions based on science. I call certain phenomena ‘religious’ because Western European societies set them aside as ‘different’, something you ‘believe in’, rather than part of the unquestioned common sense assumptions about the world. At the same time, many religions see themselves as based on and expanding from ‘scientific’ understanding of the world. However, this religiosity also constructs itself in defence against a ‘secular’ common sense that is insensitive to the supernatural, the transcendent, the sacred (e.g. Hammer 2001; Hanegraaff 1995).

Any coherent system of meaning (humanism or communism for example) that does not refer to a specific ontology and epistemology but takes accepted ‘rational’ ‘scientific’ common sense explanations of the world as a point of departure I would call a worldview. However, in the research presented here I focused on religious practices and repertoires.

In the following chapters, I will often use the words repertoires, horizons of meaning, and orientation. These terms reflect the understanding of processes of signification explained above, as well as the open nature of the landscape of meanings that people nowadays find themselves in. The ‘resources’ for signification are no longer only institutionally controlled or necessarily locally embedded. Media, books and magazines all make it easy to become familiar with ways of making sense of the world that may come from the other side of the globe, without actually knowing anything about the way you: neighbour would make sense of the world. One can look far, or one can look near. In this book I focus on locally shared horizons of meaning and how people embedded within these locally shared horizons orient themselves with regard to the religious repertoires and institutions that are present around them.

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*The term ‘horizons of meaning’ is a staple of the hermeneutic tradition that has also informed interpretative anthropology. It is often used by Habermas to theorize communicative action and communicative rationality (Habermas 1991 [1987]).*
These terms also remind us that meanings are not individual, but shared. Although in an interview I speak to one man, or one woman, he or she has formed her opinion, shared her experiences and ideas with other people around her. She may be idiosyncratic in that she has an interest in Buddhism, while the rest of the local community of which she is a part might not even know what Buddhism is, but she also shares and orients herself with regard to locally shared horizons: she grew up in Limburg, married a man from the same place, works as a volunteer in an old people’s home and during her life was a member of various village societies. I would call Buddhism a repertoire, on which she as an individual draws. So a repertoire indicates a set of ideas, beliefs, meanings, scripts for behaviour that have some internal coherence and are ‘on offer’ in a disembedded way through mass media and consumer culture (this distinguishes it from the term horizon explained below). Although I did not really focus on this ‘individual use of repertoires’, I do go into the role and significance of mass media and consumer culture in religious practices and moral orientations of people in the south of Limburg.

The actual landscape of routines, practices and meanings into which people are born can be seen as the result of historical processes and implies the constraints and possibilities available. Agency and intentionality can be likened to the act of walking, to go and explore, to see something up close, to add something new to the landscape.

Although ‘landscape’ is a useful metaphor, it is also inadequate because it suggests a unity of time and space. In present-day society, space and time collapse in the way people can orient themselves: even though Buddhism was conceived very far away and very long ago and is now maintained and developed in a spiritual centre somewhere in France, a woman in Limburg can orient herself with the help of Buddhist horizons of meaning. Nevertheless, by using terms referring to a spatial metaphor I hope to be able to convey that my interpretations are based on balanced consideration of the given-ness of social structure (landscape), the shared nature of signification (horizons), and individual agency (the ability to move around in a landscape, to focus on a particular horizon).

Orientation, then, describes the act of referring to a particular set of meanings and practices, as embodied in repertoires, in locally shared horizons, in institutional religion and philosophies, in science, in intellectual debates etc. It implies the possibility that people orient themselves by referring to various horizons of meaning they share with other people through their participation in various contexts: work, school, home, leisure time activities etc. The use of the word horizon implies that one might shift position to take another horizon as a point of reference. The meanings that make up this horizon might be contradictory with the meanings that make up another horizon, but we can understand how this is not necessarily problematic, as long as these horizons do not merge or overlap, forcing a choice. Horizons of meaning might consist of a specific religious or professional repertoire with an internal consistency of meanings and routines, but by calling them horizons I want to indicate that I focus on them as they appear to people taking up a position within the local landscape.
7. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The research on which this book is based was not an exhaustive study of the range of religious repertoires and institutions in the region of the south of Limburg; in this study there are no protestant churches, no evangelicals, and no charismatic Catholics. These options were present, but not as part of ‘mainstream’ culture and no one in the village where I started out directed me towards these places. The various more ‘classy’ and expensive New Age centres in the region are not included either. These centres cater to a public from all over the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium and are relatively ‘disembedded’ from the region where they happen to be located. Besides, the field of the study of alternative spiritualities already has these kinds of centres well within its sights also in the Netherlands (e.g. Aupers and Otterloo 2000; Ramstedt forthcoming). My interest was primarily to investigate the religious practices more firmly embedded within the local context, so I went where my informants pointed me.

Before starting on my fieldwork, I had not established where I would do my research except in terms of geography: I started by contacting the headmaster of a local elementary school in the village of Welden10, located in a rural area bounded by three cities in the south of Limburg. My original plan was to confine my research to participant observation and in-depth interviews within the boundaries of this village. Soon, it became clear that this was an unrealistic plan, since many people participated in religious contexts outside the boundaries of their village and parish, although close by. Ignoring this would severely limit the scope of this research and would result in a sort of social history research of one parish, something I was not interested in. By following the leads from Welder to other religious contexts, my research turned out to include two religious contexts located within the same municipality: a ‘spiritual society’ and a (Catholic) pastoral centre.

During the fieldwork period, funerals and other rituals around death and dying emerged as an issue where all the changes and differences between the different generations, between the church and lay people have to be negotiated. Following up on this theme, I interviewed several priests and undertakers about this issue, as well as someone connected to the humanist society.

It was only after the actual fieldwork that I started to read more about the changes in the discourse of the church. Before the fieldwork, I read some general accounts about the changes in the Dutch Catholic church. In fact, the literature on Dutch Catholicism is vast, and Catholic scholars and theologians have produced most of it. However, I did not recognize much of the descriptions of the changes within Dutch Catholicism with regard to my own experience of the place and significance of the church in Limburg or the actual beliefs and practices of ‘normal’ (as opposed to clergy or active Catholic) people. So I decided to postpone further reading until after the

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10 This is a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the people who helped me with my research.
fieldwork when I would be in a better position to assess how these historical accounts could shed light on my research. If I had been doing a historical research, I would have had to be more aware of the historical context to guide my questions, but since I was doing an anthropological research, I reversed the process: I first wanted to see what religious repertoires and discourses were referred to by people, what historical changes were considered significant and in what way, and take this as my starting point for digging into the historical background.

My research consisted of three main activities: interviews with key informants and life history interviews with lay believers in Welden, (sometimes participant) observation in the courses and discussion groups of a local (Catholic) pastoral centre and (participant) observation in a Spiritualist/New Age association.

Geographically, the parish, the pastoral centre and the spiritual society were located close to each other, although not in the same village. The people frequenting the pastoral centre and the spiritual society were mostly local, and the few ‘imported’ people participating in these contexts had been living in the area for a long time or were committed to become part of their local community. The difference between ‘locals’ and ‘import’ is usually keenly felt, but of course this difference fades over time as people get used to each other. Other differences were just as important in the two contexts: the difference between lay people and priests, between lay pastors and priests, between professionals and priests, between spirit mediums and those who were ‘unawakened’, between those with a higher education and those without, between city people and rural people, between neo-conservatives and progressives.

In each of the ethnographic chapters, I will go into the methodologies and my own position more specifically and show how they are relevant to understand the descriptions and interpretations offered. In this introductory chapter I want to go into an issue that had an impact on the whole of my fieldwork.

Right at the start of my fieldwork, it became clear that doing participant observation in the parish life of Welden would be difficult because of the history of polarization between a ‘neo-conservative’ priest and ‘progressive’ Catholics in that parish. This polarization had affected the whole community: most people felt that after the polarization, ‘it was never the same again’ and the parish church was not ‘theirs’ church anymore. They referred me to the pastoral centre two kilometres away from Welden instead. They felt I would be better off with the people of the pastoral centre, because in contrast to the parish priest, the pastoral centre had ‘kept up with the times’. Even the parish priest (who had, supposedly, not ‘kept up with the times’, and had a problematic relationship with this centre) referred me to them. His argument was that ‘his’ (neo-conservative) brand of Catholicism did not make for a very lively parish life, so there would not be many interesting things for me to observe. It was also clear that my presence was not comfortable to him, since I was not a Catholic and he supposed I did not share his neo-conservative views on morality. At first, this made him wary; although after the interviews I had with him it seems this wariness lessened.
Although I had some confidence that we could have established a working relationship, the rift his style and views had caused in the local community was a significant obstacle to getting cooperation for my research: people were afraid that my research, because it focused on religious life, would open old wounds and rivalries. So I had to tread carefully: clearly local parish and community life did not amount to an environment that I could hope to navigate safely with just one year of participant observation if I was doing research on religion. The different factions had each cut their losses, and settled down into a status quo that minimized contact and conflict between them. To gain an impression of parish life therefore, I stuck to doing interviews with individuals.

In contrast, the people of the pastoral centre welcomed my research and were very interested. Although this was very nice, it also made things difficult for me. First of all, there were issues of confidentiality: they had to trust me not to tell anything damaging to ‘religious rivals’ (neo-conservative clergy), and I had to be careful not to tell them too much about their ‘religious rivals’ as well (neo-conservative clergy and the spiritual society). Second, although on the face of it, the people of the pastoral centre and the background I come from are similar in values and general outlook on life, and the professional staff shared a strong sociological interest with me, this sometimes made me even more aware of the differences between them and myself: I was not a Catholic, not even baptised, and I did not want to become a Catholic either.

This tension between mutual recognition and familiarity and the underlying differences was reinforced by the very inclusive ideology of the pastoral centre. This ideology made me feel that I would be spoiling the atmosphere if I would insist in signalling that I was not the same, I did not belong to them, was not a Catholic. When people are constantly telling each other and themselves that the message of Jesus was that every person counts and therefore they should not exclude anyone, it feels sort of impolite to voluntarily exclude yourself mentally and to some extent also emotionally, while at the same time sticking around physically. Besides, this inclusiveness was to the advantage of my research because it facilitated access to the courses and discussion groups.

The place that seems to come closest to taking advantage of the ‘new’ situation where repertoires seem to be freely available was the Spiritual society of the Hills, where I also did participant observation. In the spiritual society, any new information, practice, and idea would be received with interest and curiosity, discussed at length and immediately applied and tested. In this context, I was classified as a ‘seeker’ and easily included as such. I tried to explain many times that I was doing a PhD and that this would not be so much about my personal views on spiritual matter, but more on their views on them, yet this did not really seem to sink in. I was a seeker; I was younger than most of the other people there, and therefore like any newcomer, the object for much unsolicited advice. Which was of course convenient for me as a researcher.
8. OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the following chapters, the subject of changing religious practices and moral orientations will be looked at from different perspectives that aim to come together in the last chapter. Although, as I said, this is not a holistic study of one community, the different ‘fragments’ presented here often overlap and add up to a general picture in which common dynamics and a logic of practice can be recognized.

In chapter 2, I will discuss some changes in discourse within the Catholic Church, as a background and contrast to how local lay believers look back on the past. In chapter 3 I will present the narratives of the elder generation about the changes in the church and local society they have witnessed in their lives. Chapter 4 describes the place of religion within the local landscape as it has emerged out of the process of secularization and the rise of the welfare state and consumer culture. Chapters 5 and 6 will describe two explicitly ‘religious’ contexts: the Spiritual Society of the Hills and the pastoral centre.

Of these chapters, only chapter 2 has an explicitly historical character, and it is not based on my own historical research. By going through the accounts of the changes in the Catholic Church given by historians, I will point out some significant shifts in the discourse about morality. Although chapter 3 is based on interviews asking about the changes in the church, these interviews are mainly analysed as a reflection on these changes from the vantage point of the present, not as sources for a historical description of these changes on the local level. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see what these people considered to be significant changes, and how this differs from or corresponds to the discussions that were raging among lay intellectuals and clergy at the time.

Chapter 4 is based on a variety of sources: historical accounts of secularization and the position of the church in Limburg, interviews with key informants and life history interviews with the younger generation. Chapters 5 and 6 are based on (participant) observation. Descriptions of the interactions that took place here form the basis of an interpretation of the nature of these two forms of religiosity. In the last chapter I will give a summary of my findings taking the different themes of the BSS programme as a point of departure, and then discuss these finding with regard to the theoretical debate on present-day religiosity summarized in this introductory chapter.
CHAPTER 2: MORAL DISCOURSES IN DUTCH CATHOLICISM: FROM PILLARIZATION, VIA LIBERATION TO POLARIZATION

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the changes in discourse on morality within Dutch Catholicism since the Second World War. The organization of the Catholic segment of Dutch society extended right down to the grass roots level through the uniquely Dutch phenomenon of pillarization (See Coleman 1978: for an English language description of the Catholic pillar). In Limburg, the Catholic pillar was in fact not one of the pillars, but encompassed the whole of social life. The tenet: ‘no salvation outside the Church’ was a literal description not only of spiritual but also of social reality in Limburg. To be able to understand the institutional landscape and ideological climate in which the pre-war generations and the immediate post-war generations grew up, which ‘moral orientation points’ and vocabularies played a role in those years, a thorough review of the moral discourses within Dutch Catholicism is necessary. The personal narratives of these generations make up the bulk of chapters 3 and 4 of this book. In contrast, this chapter focuses on tracing the developments within Dutch Catholicism on the level of discourses within the institution of the church and associated organizations, as it is represented in the historical and sociological literature.

The political history of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was marked by a struggle between different denominations and ideologies for equal rights, resulting in the uniquely Dutch organization of society in different ‘pillars’. This process was taken up and completed after WWII (Coleman 1978 chapter 2). A pillar has been defined as a network of organizations covering different domains of life, such as politics, unions, recreation, health care, schooling and religion that shape the corresponding subculture and give it its identity (Hellerans 1988:43). These identities were sharply demarcated from each other, and on an everyday level, interaction between people of different pillars was discouraged or actively forbidden: Catholics, socialists, protestants of different churches and humanists; all had their own organizations, political parties, church buildings, radio broadcasting services, swimming pools, schools, cemeteries etc.

The sixties and seventies saw the gradual crumbling of these pillars, as the state took over many of the functions of the pillarized organizations, countercultural movements criticized and shook up ‘the establishment’, and the churches started to empty at an unprecedented rate. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Catholic pillar disintegrated only as a result of outside forces such as modernization, and the consequent out-flux of lay believers who did not see Catholicism as a plausible worldview anymore. A review of the literature shows that many changes were instigated from inside the Catholic pillar. Long before believers stopped going to church regularly church-officials recognized and tried to answer to the challenges of modernity, lay believers emancipated and pushed for more democratic relations within the church,
and insights from psychology and the social sciences were applied to the organization of belief (Coleman 1978:85; Simons and Winkel 1987).

In the Netherlands, the original impetus for the organization of the Catholic pillar starting in the 1920-ies was a fear of what the church saw as the ‘dangers of modern society’. At the same time, modernity also created the conditions for the Catholic pillar to organize itself effectively, reaching not only the cultural elites but down until the lowest classes (Coleman 1978:85; Helleman 1988:44; Simons and Winkel 1987). The Catholic Church saw it as its duty to keep its flock together, safely shepherded by a large and active clergy. This care extended from cradle to grave, into every detail of daily life. The organization of the pillar of Dutch Catholicism was hugely successful. It enabled Dutch Catholics to become very influential politically, and it enabled the Catholic Church to keep a very tight rein on the spiritual and moral life of Catholics: schools were run by congregations, on the board of every Catholic organization priests and chaplains usually had the largest say, and local authorities cooperated with the clergy in guarding against ‘moral decay’, especially in Limburg.

The discourse against ‘moral decay’, represented by enemies such as socialism (no respect for authority) and ‘neo-Malthusianism’ (proponents of birth control) is the subject of section 2 of this chapter. The pre-war generation whose narratives are central to the next chapter grew up and had their first children during the height of this discourse.

In section 3, I discuss the changes in the discourse within the church and associated Catholic organizations that hesitantly started among Catholic intellectuals in the late fifties. The ideas developed in these circles influenced key decision makers within the Catholic Church and came out into the open in the sixties. Especially after the Second Vatican Council this discourse radicalized and caught up many believers in its zeal for reform. In those days, the Dutch Catholics made world news with their proposals for new ways of ‘being a church’. Paradoxically, the high degree of organization of Dutch Catholicism that was once so highly praised in Rome, also made sure that these ideas were much more swiftly implemented than Rome could keep track of developments. The post-war generation whose views are discussed in chapter 4 came of age during this period.

In section 4 I discuss the main events during the remainder of the twentieth century with regard to the Catholic Church and Catholicism in general in the Netherlands. The history of Dutch Catholicism after the 1970-ies is marked by polarization: Rome reacted to the Dutch zeal for experimenting and democratization by installing as many conservative bishops as they had the opportunity to install. At the same time, the Catholic organizations that had made up the Catholic pillar became more independent from the Church and secularized. The specific history of the Catholic Church and the Catholic pillar in Limburg is the subject in section 5. In this section, I focus less on changes in discourse (they largely followed the national trends) and more on the social presence of the church on the local level.
Note on the literature

Insiders, active Catholics, have written much of the literature on Dutch Catholicism of the past 50 years and also of before that time. In some cases, they even played a leading role in the changes they were describing (such as Walter Godijn, who published extensively on Dutch Catholicism e. g. Godijn 1973; Godijn, Jacobs et al. 1999; Godijn, Wewerinch et al. 1986). To these people, writing the history of change was often partly a reflexive exercise as a committed participant (Luykx 2000:209). Even when this was not the explicit goal of the undertaking of writing history, the concerns of these authors often revolved around the same issues that dominated the debate in Dutch Catholicism: the decline of church going, changes in moral discourse and beliefs, Catholicism and social justice, the role of women and lay believers, the future of celibacy, democratization within the church. Hope for the future of Catholicism in the Netherlands is held out or denied based on the answers to questions such as: were the changes taking place during the sixties too radical, or were they justified and is Rome simply ‘lagging behind’? Does the dwindling number of committed believers and callings to the priesthood mean that Catholicism is slowly ‘dying out’ in the Netherlands? Is Catholicism relevant to the present day and age?

Thurlings describes three generations of researchers of Dutch Catholicism: the first generation, mainly historians, looked at Dutch Catholicism as an oppressed minority within the Dutch political landscape and described their history in terms of social and cultural emancipation. The epitome of this generation, according to Thurlings, is Rogier’s work significantly titled: ‘Reborn into Freedom’ (In Vrijheid Herboren). The second generation, in contrast, assumed that Catholics in the Netherlands were dominantly motivated by the drive to defend themselves against the dangers of modernity, and to refine measures of internal control. They were very critical of the benefits of the Catholic pillar. Godijn is an important figure in this second generation. The third generation Thurlings recognizes uses the sociological model of ‘movements’ to understand Dutch Catholicism. History should be seen as a process by which charismatic leaders, supported by an elite, manage to mobilize large groups of people for their ideas (Thurlings 2004:18-20).

The historical sketch presented here is mainly based on authors who use, implicitly or explicitly, this last model to present their findings. The changes within Dutch Catholicism are then seen as part of a movement that undergoes several stages: a charismatic leader, supported by a powerful elite, mobilizes the anxiety of the masses. During the next stage, there is militant action and a great enthusiasm for organization, culminating in a phase of triumphalism: the Catholic pillar at its height during the centennial of the restoration of the hierarchy in 1953 (section 2). This becomes the prelude to a phase of internal factionalism and critique: the forces of renewal, spurred by the Second Vatican Council, versus the conservative Rome-oriented Catholics (section 3).
Even when their role was not very active, the position of most of these historians and social scientists is usually one of sympathy with the forces for renewal, even in those cases where nostalgia for the ‘rich Roman life’ of the years before Vatican II is freely admitted. This overrepresentation of progressive Catholics in sociological and historical descriptions leaves us with much insight into the motivations and discourses of the actors that were pushing for radical changes, but with less insight into the motivations and discourses of the neo-conservative faction in Dutch Catholicism (see also Thurlings 200:37) let alone, lay Catholics at the grassroots level. However, it is the faction of neo-conservatives that has now gained the upper hand in terms of church politics in the Dutch Catholic Church. Concerning the literature on Limburg, it was well known that the neo-conservative bishop Gijsen of Limburg did not have much time for social scientists. He was a historian himself, and he saw the radical changes in Dutch Catholicism as no more than a slight ripple in the history of the Catholic Church. The literature on Limburg is even more characterized by a progressive spirit, a drive to ‘unmask’ the representations of Gijsen, than the writing on Dutch Catholicism in general.

Despite the ‘progressive’ bias in the perceptions of the historians and sociologists of Dutch Catholicism, there are more than enough good studies to give an insightful sketch of the changes in discourse, the heady atmosphere of change that gripped Dutch Catholics at a certain point and the clamour this zeal for change gave rise to. The descriptions below are based on studies such as the detailed books by Hanneke Westhoff, Simons and Winkeler and Ton van Schaik (Schaik 1997; Simons and Winkeler 1987; Westhoff 1996), fleshed out with studies such as those by Luyckx, Nissen (Luykx 2000; Nissen 1996; Nissen 2000) and general historical overviews of the changes in Dutch society as described by Kennedy (Kennedy 1995a) and in Limburg, as described by Ubachs (Ubachs 2010).

2. CATHOLIC IN EVERYTHING: TRIUMPH AND MORAL ANXIETY

From the time when the Catholic hierarchy was re-installed in the Netherlands in 1853 until the time period under review in this chapter, the Dutch Catholic Church was characterized by a policy of strong ultramontanism. This ideology took Rome and the pope as its centre, and although it accepted the separation between church and state, it refused to see the church as subservient to the state, and resisted any interference from the state in religious affairs, especially from a state dominated by Protestants and liberals, as was the case in the Netherlands. This ultramontanism of Dutch Catholicism was reinforced by the announcement of the dogma of the infallibility of the pope in 1870, consolidating his power and creating an opposition between the ‘absolute’ power of the Church and the fallible, democratic power of the state. It also contrasted sharply with the tradition of Dutch Protestantism, in which the independent reading of the Bible was an important element. The Dutch Catholics were proud that at least they did not have endless discussions, uncertainties and schisms in their church: they had the certainties proclaimed by the pope.
The boundaries towards Protestantism were further reinforced by the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary, emphasizing her central importance to Catholics and sparking off new devotional traditions such as those centring on Lourdes. The ideology of ultramontanism was also explicitly anti-modern, and feared the influence of both liberalism and Marxism. The Catholic historian Roes has characterized ultramontanism as a modern movement with three distinct aims: (1) the disciplining and subjection of all Catholics (from lay believers, to priests and bishops) to the infallible authority of the pope, (2) the promotion of the sovereign legitimacy of the central church authorities based on tradition and (3) the systematic penetration of daily life through the promotion of devotions and other regular religious practices (Roes in Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995:46).

In order to achieve these goals, Dutch Catholicism organized itself very effectively. The main drive towards this organization started in the 1920-ies. In this history, the second World War was no more than an interlude. However, for Catholic intellectuals and politicians, this interlude provided a shared experience that laid the foundations for later changes. The late forties and early fifties are usually described as a time when everybody in the Netherlands was working hard to rebuild pre-war society after the destruction of WWII. The Catholics joined in this spirit in their own way, by strengthening their own organizational structures. Church attendance and membership of Catholic organizations was exceptionally high. Because of their obedience and adherence to devotions, the pope often mentioned the Dutch Catholics as an example to Catholics in other countries. This self-conscious Catholic identity and frontier mentality was further proven by the exceptionally high level of callings to the priesthood (Nissen 2000:84) as well as the tremendously high birth-rate (Knippenberg 1992:171).

In Dutch collective memory the fifties are represented as the height of a quiet and solid, or stifling and narrow-minded -depending on who is speaking- bourgeois lifestyle. The ideal was to rebuild society the way it was, but better and more prosperous. Morals were characterized by discipline and asceticism. The pillarization of Dutch society was perfected.

At the same time, there were people hoping for a ‘breakthrough’ (‘doorbraak’ in Dutch) between the rigidly segregated pillars. During the Second World War, people from different pillars had worked together in the resistance movement against the German occupation. This experience gave rise to a belief that the old enmity between Catholics and Protestants, and between Catholics and the ‘reds’, could be left behind. The Catholic clergy, however, opposed this breakthrough, seeing it as a threat to the moral integrity and Catholicism of their flocks.

It was a time when Dutch Catholics felt they had finally come to achieve the emancipation they had strived for in the previous centuries. In the years following the declaration of the Batavian Republic in 1796, Catholicism slowly rebuilt its institutional presence in the Netherlands, culminating in the re-installment of the hierarchy of bishops and parishes in 1853. The rhetoric used in 1953, at the celebration of the centennial of this important event, had a decidedly triumphant ring to it, speculating on the chance
that in a few years Catholics would make up more than half of the Dutch population. Their political influence had been rising steadily and was still rising, and they were tightly organized. Furthermore, almost every Catholic family was eager to contribute at least one son to the clergy, or a daughter to one of the many orders. This meant that there was an abundance of priests, friars and nuns to staff parishes, schools and the many Catholic organizations. In Limburg, the attraction of the secular clergy was particularly strong, so that many parishes had at least one priest assisted by several chaplains (Nissen 2000:86). This meant that the diocesan hierarchy had enough manpower to serve as spiritual advisors on the boards of the many flourishing Catholic organizations with all their local chapters.

This clergy promoted an awareness of the many threats to be combated and the need for Catholics to close the ranks against these threats: communism, socialism, modernism, freemasonry, Neo-Malthusianism and, of course, the old time enemy of Protestantism. The virtues of obedience to the church and ‘knowing one’s place’ were central to the cohesion among Catholics at this time. The threat of withholding the sacraments (and thereby withholding salvation as well as social acceptance) was used to keep everybody on the straight and narrow as defined by the Catholic Church. In 1954, the Dutch bishops published a joint Episcopal letter titled ‘Catholics in public life’ in 1954 (Jong, Alfrink et al. 1954). In this letter Catholics were admonished not to listen to non-Catholic and especially socialist or humanist radio broadcasts, not to trade with non-Catholics, not to read non-Catholic newspapers:

‘We enforce the rule that the holy Sacraments should be refused – and if he dies unrepentant must be refused a Catholic burial – to the Catholic of whom it is known that he is a member or that he, without being a member, still regularly reads socialist writings or magazines or attends socialist meetings’(Jong, Alfrink et al. 1954:43 my translation).11

Among protestants and socialists, this Episcopal letter was received with indignation, and those Catholics who had organized themselves within the socialist party were particularly affected. But in general, historians agree that most Catholics ignored the admonitions (Coleman 1978:55-56). Change was in the air, and it was inevitable. Later, the effect of this Episcopal letter was described as a boomerang: it achieved exactly the opposite objective it was intended to achieve. Because of the many protests, and because of the respected positions those who protested occupied, opennessness towards cooperation with non-Catholics became a topic that could not be avoided anymore and even came to be articulated as a necessity among Catholic intellectuals. Especially openness towards the other Christian churches was felt to be desirable. And the VARA, the ‘socialist’ radio

11 ‘Wij handhaven de bepaling dat de Heilige Sacramenten moeten geweigerd worden - en als hij zonder bekering stervt, ook de kerkelijke begrafenis – aan de katholieke van wie bekend is dat hij lid is van een socialistische vereniging of dat hij ‘Zonder lid te zijn, toch geregeld socialistische geschreven of bladen leest of socialistische vergaderingen bijwoont’.
station, seemed to become even more popular among Catholics (Jacobs in Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995:30-31).

**Moral renaissance**

The rebuilding of the Catholic pillar after WWII went hand in hand with an effort towards a moral renaissance and a very well developed and detailed reasoning on ‘morality’, which seemed to be almost synonymous with ‘sexuality’\(^{12}\). Nationally and in Catholic circles, the immediate post-war period was a time of concern over the loosening of morals that was perceived to be the aftermath of the war, encouraged by ‘the mass media’ (film, dance and music). The many Catholic organizations that concerned themselves with the education of youth produced numerous booklets, folders and courses for the young. These materials proscribed exactly, in meticulous detail, what was and what was not allowed in terms of dress, relationships between the sexes, music and dancing. In schools and Catholic societies where young people could go for entertainment, all behaviour and thought that could be even remotely related to sexuality was the subject of intense scrutiny and worry for the educators. Lists of questions were published to help a priest along in taking confessions (obligatory every fortnight) and holc the sexual lives of young people to the light: masturbation, kissing, holding hands and the exact feelings this aroused were all subjects a priest could, and should, enquire into. This information could then be fitted into an elaborate classification of sins, with which the penitence called for could be calculated.

The argument was that young people were allowed to develop a bond of love, but that a sexual bond was preserved for marriage, partners should ‘save themselves’, keep their love pure and chaste. Anything that aroused sexual feelings could be an occasion for sin and should therefore be warned against and prohibited\(^{13}\).

The more these rules were refined, the more the clergy was confronted by the fact that their discourse was mystifying to many young people: the censure of everything to do with sexuality was so effective that many young people did not have a clue what they were being warned against. After all, education on sexual matters was thought to be unnecessary for the young, so it was usually the priest who informed a

\(^{12}\) The description of the post-war concern with morals and in particular chastity and the efforts of Catholic intellectuals to promote a different way of dealing with these issues discussed in the next section is based for the most part on the historical monograph of Hanneke Westhoff unless otherwise indicated (Westhoff 1996)

\(^{13}\) Examples of the anxiety about sexuality and the level of detail of the proscriptions for chastity are collected in a book titled 'The Desert of Morals' (Kroon 1965). At the time of publication of this book, all these prohibitions and rules were apparently already seen as something strange and exotic, and more importantly, a testimony to the small-mindedness of Catholic clerics.

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couple about to be wedded of the right way of fulfilling their marriage and warn them against the sin of trying to prevent conception (Westerhoff 1996: 132).

One can imagine that the ambiguity about sexuality (one should not know about it, and at the same time one was constantly warned against its pitfalls) produced a very strange atmosphere around the subject. Until the time of marriage, the subject of sexuality was necessarily clouded by an aura of sin and taboo. After marriage, it became the area of life where sin and the prevention of it were defined by the church, right into the most intimate details to root out the grave sin of ‘Neo-Malthusianism’ (birth control). In the papal encyclical Casti Connubii, Pope Pius XI had left no doubt about what he saw as the right way of having marital relations and that procreation was the primary aim of the conjugal act:

‘Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious’. (PiusXI 1932:54th paragraph)

This was interpreted in such a way that anything preventing the conception of children was seen as a sin that could not be absolved until the couple involved repented and promised to resume normal marital relationships.

Since the beginning of the 1920-ies, the moral instructions for marital life had received much attention in the training of the clergy preparing for a pastoral role (Westerhoff 1996: 132). Priests had explicit instructions to ask probing questions about the details of a couple’s sexual relations, because the sins of preventing conception were deemed so grave that it could not be left to the initiative of the confessor to confess them voluntarily. According to the testimony of both priests and lay believers, many (although not all) priests followed these instructions to the letter in their role as confessor (see for personal stories illustrating the way this control was exercised Kerklaan 1987). Furthermore, priests and chaplains would visit the homes of families in their parishes regularly, to inquire when the next child would be due and admonish the couples that were slow to produce children. Periodic retention to limit the number of births would only be ‘allowed’ under special circumstances, on the advice of the family physician. In that case, a priest could give a couple ‘dispensation’.

In many cases however, the family doctor was unhelpful in providing the necessary legitimation for this dispensation. The society of Catholic family doctors was a strong force helping in maintaining the ‘right matrimonial relationships’. Initially, they opposed the use of periodic retention as much as possible. In the thirties, a family doctor from Brabant had published a booklet detailing the calculations necessary to know when a woman was fertile. At the time of publication, this had caused much discussion. The general opinion among Catholic physicians and priests was that practicing this method of birth control was only permitted if there were very grave circumstances that made it advisable that a woman should not bear children.
According to the moral discourse dominating Dutch Catholicism at the time, birth control was sinful for two reasons. First, because it endangered the primary aim of marriage. Second, it promoted selfishness and wanton behaviour since apparently the couple engaging in sex was not prepared to carry the responsibility of the natural result of this act. The sexual act thereby became ‘unchaste’ and sinful, instead of ‘chaste’ and loving. Another argument used against periodic retention was that it introduced a measure of calculation into marital life that was not conducive to a loving relationship.

The doctrine of confession, repentance and absolution to restore people to a life in a ‘state of grace’ was an important mechanism in enforcing this moral discourse. A woman confessing to the wish not to have more children would usually be severely reprimanded by her confessor. In popular language, this was described as ‘getting the shutter’: the little window between priest and confessant would be slid shut, effectively dismissing her and her concerns, leaving her in a ‘state of sin’ (in Dutch: ‘het schuifje krijgen’). It also meant that one could not participate in the Holy Communion during church services. To avoid revealing this shame, one could either stay away from church services or promise to banish all thoughts of controlling the number of children and ask for absolution from the sin of considering this option, submitting to the will of God the number of children one would subsequently be blessed with, hoping for an early menopause.

Of course, many women found a way around these obstacles by picking a priest that they knew to be permissive, or by going to a doctor who did not require a permission slip. However, especially in the countryside to many women these alternate routes would not be accessible (Westhoff 1996:132-133). As mentioned before, the birth rate among Catholics was astonishingly high until well into the fifties, so it seems that all these measures provided the expected results. Together, priests and family physicians decided the fate of a woman’s body, health and number of children.

In this case we can see clearly how the church controlled what people knew; decided how much was good and right for them to know, and decisively impacted on the infrastructure of options available through its domination of education, the libraries, and in this instance the organization of Catholic physicians. Although in later years, many aspects of the Catholic regime were criticized, it was especially the aura of taboo and the strictness of the rules surrounding sexuality that came to be discussed. During my research I noticed that among professionals of the younger generations it causes much outrage, and priests are usually very careful to avoid the impression that they are preying into peoples’ sexual lives. Through strictly defining the boundaries of a ‘good’ moral life, the church attempted to block alien ideas as much as possible. Within these

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14 During my fieldwork, I encountered many people who reproduced this critique repeatedly in almost literally the same words: “what business is it of the pope/priest what I do in bed with my wife?!”
boundaries, the focus of control was the regulation of sexuality and the promotion of a consciousness that aimed to be ‘Catholic in everything’. In the next chapter, it will become clear that the discourse on sexuality is still very deeply embedded in the way of thinking of the pre-war generation.

3. FROM MORALIZING TO PSYCHOLOGISING

Despite the Episcopal letter of 1954, the discussions within Dutch Catholicism persisted, and young Catholic intellectuals continued to take inspiration from sources outside Catholicism, such as socialism, psychology and sociology, as well as from radical theological debates such as the ‘Nouvelle Théologie’ from France. But it was especially the discussion about the Catholic morality on sexuality that busied the hearts and minds of many Catholic intellectuals during the late fifties.

This discussion was put on the agenda with a vengeance by the Catholic Movement for general mental health (KNBGG)15. This movement was inspired by ideas about mental hygiene that were developed in the beginning of the twentieth century in the U.S. Originally, the aim of this movement was to improve the conditions in psychiatric hospitals but later it shifted its emphasis towards the prevention of mental illness. After the Second World War it developed in a full fledged and influential movement for the promotion of the general mental health of Dutch Catholics. Because of their catalysing role in changing the way Catholics thought about sexuality, authority and punishment, the (mostly) men of this movement have been characterized as ‘spiritual liberators’16 by their historian, Hanneke Westhoff (see the title of her monograph Westhoff 1996).

According to some prominent figures in the Catholic mental health movement (notably the physician Buyendijk, who was a convert), the small-mindedness of Catholic regulations concerning morality was the source of many psychological problems, a higher delinquency among Catholics due to a not fully grown personal conscience, and a high rate of sexual delinquency. Catholic moral education and the social and spiritual ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ emphasized what would happen if one ‘broke the rules’. According to Buyendijk and other spiritual liberators, Catholic moral teaching should focus on inspiring believers to live a morally good life, whereas now it in fact prevented believers from developing fully as independent adults. Catholic morality as it was enforced at that time, according to the spiritual liberators forced Catholics to live in constant fear of sin.

The spiritual liberators perceived the relationship between the church regulations and the sexual life of many Catholics as especially problematic. Instead of

15 Katholieke Nationaal Bureau voor Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg, later KCV: Katholieke Centrale Vereniging voor Geestelijke Volksgezondheid.

16 In Dutch: geestelijke bevrijders
promoting ‘chaste and pure’ love, these rules promoted an atmosphere of ignorance, taboo and intense psychological suffering and neurosis. The aim of the spiritual liberators was to develop a discourse and practice within Dutch Catholicism that would make the ‘fears, vulnerabilities and constraints’ of Dutch Catholics disappear (Bartels, one of the foremen of this movement, cited in Westhoff 1996:261).

At first, the discussions on Catholic morality concerning sexuality took place behind closed doors. Anything intended for public use was controlled and censored by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church (it was the practice to ask the bishop for an ‘imprimatur’ for all publications of Catholic organizations and intellectuals). But gradually, the censorship of the church loosened and sexuality and birth control became an openly discussed topic in the Catholic media: first some Catholic magazines, later the radio and finally, television. In Amsterdam, the psychiatrist Trimbos set up a ‘school’ for marriage. The aim of this school was to help couples not to ‘control’ their sexuality, but rather to develop it. The school was hugely successful, convincing the spiritual liberators that they were addressing a real need. In weekly radio talks on the Catholic broadcasting service (KRO), Trimbos also discussed the subject of marital sexuality, sexual education and birth control quite openly. Within a few years, the field lay wide open, because the spiritual liberators also argued that it should not be the clergy that advised a couple about their sexual relations, but that it was a subject for mental health, to be managed by professionals trained in psychology.

Throughout these explorations, the ‘psychological’ aspect of being human emerged as an area of concern preceding religious and ethical concerns. A healthy psychology was a prerequisite to a good moral and religious life. The question to be asked changed from ‘is it right?’ to ‘is it healthy?’ (Westhoff 1996:120).

‘Official’ Catholic morality, more specifically Casti Connubii remained the primary moral source. In their zeal to bring about a ‘healthier’ moral development among Catholics, the spiritual liberators remained, at least in their own eyes, loyal to traditional Catholic morality. This was explained in sophisticated and flowery language that bridged the old discourse of chastity and the new discourse of psychological health quite easily. For example, they often referred to a ‘sensus Catolicus’, a supposedly typically Catholic receptivity to direction by the Holy Spirit and the church as the body of Christ. It was on this ‘sensus Catolicus’ that they relied to make their efforts to improve the mental health of Catholics not just a neutral professional effort, but a truly Catholic endeavour that would promote the liberating message of Jesus Christ (Westhoff 1996:314-315).

Nevertheless, Casti Connubii was reinterpreted in such a way that the role of sexual relations in the ‘primary’ (procreation) and ‘secondary’ (a loving relationship) aims of marriage came to be seen quite differently, influenced by the ideas of

\[\text{zodat “die angsten, kwetsbaarheden en onvrijheden zouden verdwijnen”}\]
psychology and existentialism. The reasoning went as follows: from a psychological point of view, good sexual relations are also important in developing the kind of loving fulfilment that according to Casti Connubii is the secondary aim of marriage. Therefore it is conceivable that it could be better not to have more than a certain number of children, since this would put unnecessary strain on marital relations, the happiness of the couple and the attention and love they could give to the children they already had. Therefore, if a couple already had some children, it should be all right for them to use ways to prevent having more children, since the primary aim of marriage had already been fulfilled.

Topics such as homosexuality and masturbation, previously sources of much anxious rule making, were also repositioned. They came to be seen as psychological problems, which were blocking the path to happiness and a spiritual life, rather than as sins, which are the result of morally wrong choices. After all, how could one speak of a ‘choice’, if the morally wrong behaviour was caused by a psychological problem? Furthermore, the extent to which a couple should be allowed to explore their sexuality before marriage was much debated. Sexuality and even morality in general became a topic for psychologists and mental health workers, and not for the clergy. By this reasoning, the church hierarchy relinquished much of its control over the minds and emotions of their flock to ‘professionals’.

At first, this shift in discourse took place mainly in the ‘top’ layers of society, among the more educated people, the young people being educated at that time, and the clergy. They read the magazines were these things were discussed openly, they witnessed the changes in curriculum in the education of priests and universities, they were studying at the university of Nijmegen at the time of the controversial psycho-analytical practice of dr. Anna Terruwe, who was eventually reprimanded by Rome for her supposedly ‘immoral’ advice to young priests with sexual problems. They were also the ones most interested in reconciling the intellectual, political and practical developments of modernity with their Roman Catholic affiliations.

In time, these lay Catholic professionals implemented these ideas in the many institutions and organizations of the Catholic pillar: from kindergarten to university, from the first experiments with co-education to the re-organization of the training of priests in open institutes mixed with the training for lay pastors. Furthermore, due to radio and television, ‘the public’ at large was also drawn into the discussion. And since it concerned issues very close to their heart, this public listened avidly.

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19 Especially in boarding schools the nuns and friars concerned themselves with the dangers of homosexuality and masturbation: hands above the blankets, bathing with a dress on, discouraging ‘special friendships’ etc.
The emancipation of individual consciousness and the democratization of the church

The point when church control over marital relations was openly, although almost unintentionally, given up, could be situated in 1963. All the discussions opened up by the spiritual liberators and in other segments of the Catholic pillar had raised many questions around authority, morality and the extent to which people should be allowed to follow their ‘own consciousness’ in matters concerning sexuality. At the same time, oral contraceptives were becoming available. A tension was arising between these debates and their inevitable conclusions on the one hand, and the conservative, often ultramontane, policy that had characterized the Dutch Church until that time on the other hand. Within the church hierarchy, the clergy expected that Second Vatican Council, still not concluded at the time, would create more clarity. After all, the main aim of this council, as summarized by the term ‘aggiornamento’ introduced by pope John XXIII, was to bring the church up to date.

However, a statement made on television in 1963 by bishop Bekkers of Brabant, foreshortened this process. This statement was made long before the Second Vatican Council was concluded, and long before the pope made any pronouncements on the use of oral contraceptives or other methods of birth control. From the literature it seems that Bekkers’ pronouncements gave the process through which the relationship between lay people and clergy in the Netherlands was fundamentally restructured a momentum that made subsequent developments seem inevitable.

In one of the short television speeches that he often made at the end of a news programme on the Catholic Broadcasting Service (KRO), he declared that the decision on the number of children to have should be left to the individual consciousness of the couple involved. According to the biographer of Alfrink, the Dutch archbishop at the time, Bekkers made this statement without first consulting with his colleagues. Alfrink actually disagreed with Bekkers, but felt he could not do so publicly (Schaik 1997:347). Bishop Bekkers was immensely popular with the majority of Dutch Catholics and even likened to the charismatic pope John XXIII.

In general, Bekkers’ comments on morality made during these television broadcasts emphasized that the church had perhaps been too repressive in the past, fostering fear and grief rather than belief. In these kinds of pronouncements the influence of the spiritual liberators was evident. But because he was a bishop, his pronouncements were not only a watershed with regard to sexuality, but also with regard to the use of sanctions and fear to keep the Catholic flock in line. To the generations growing up during the sixties, especially the ‘professionals’ who took over many functions from the clergy, nuns and friars in schools, hospitals and mental institutions, the whole mechanism of the sacraments as support to social and psychological control of Catholics, came to be seen as something immoral in itself.

Bekkers’ statement came at precisely the right time. He was aware of this, as we can read in Van Schaik (Schaik 1997:347), and nervous about the pronouncements he was going to make, but convinced he was only taking a position that would be
commonplace within the church very soon. Although Alfrink did not agree with him, this position became a fait accompli, accepted as the official position of the church.

To emphasize the revolutionary nature of this statement from yet another angle: Bekkers did not say anything about birth control, which methods were allowed and which were not (Schaik 1997:347). Statements on do's and don'ts were the kind Catholics were used to, and the kind of statements the clergy expected itself to be making after ample deliberations and consultations with the approved authorities on the subject in question. Instead, Bekkers' statement effectively removed an entire area of life outside the control of the church. The statement that such an important area of life was an issue of individual consciousness where the church had no business, made by a bishop to such a large and attentive audience, opened up the field of discussion in a way that was unprecedented. Within the church, like in Dutch society in general, the authorities felt they; that change was inevitable, and did not make it difficult for them (Kennedy 1995a:413-422). In the years to follow, virtually everything that had previously been taught as the eternal and true teachings of Catholicism came under the scrutiny of the democratic spirit that arose after Vatican II.

4. THE LOCAL CHURCH VERSUS PAPAL POWER PLAY

One of the things historically setting the Dutch Catholics apart from their countrymen was their obedience and loyalty to the Roman church and its hierarchy. Partly in reaction to their marginalization in a country dominated by Protestants, Dutch Catholics had developed a very 'Rome-oriented', ultramontane kind of Catholicism. The efforts of pillarization had produced a Catholic 'flock' that seemed to follow their pastors enthusiastically or meekly, but in any case obediently (Roes in Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995:51-52). Other authors have emphasized the voices of protest that could also be heard in these years. (e.g., Akkerman and Stuurman 1985; Luykx 2000). In general however, until the late 1950ies, Dutch Catholics were (supposed to be) oriented towards Rome as their main authority. In the fifties, the complaints of active Catholics and priests were gathering steam: according to them, many Catholics were not very interested in the substance of what the church had to offer them, they just followed the rules and tried to stay out of trouble. Among the younger clergy and lay professionals, the need for pastoral redirection was becoming urgent.

From the fifties onwards the integrity of the individual consciousness came to take on a new role for Catholics, publicly formulated in Bekkers' statement. This key enlightenment value, well developed among Protestants, proved to be a catalyst of many changes. Some have called this the 'second emancipation': after the emancipation of the Catholic population as a whole within the Dutch nation came the emancipation of the laity vis-à-vis the church as a hierarchical institution. Others have noted that this emancipation concerned more the lower clergy and regulars: lay Catholics could simply walk away, but clergy and regulars couldn’t, except by 'jumping the wall' (i.e. breaking their vows) (Roes in Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995:52-53). However, since lay professionals
found their work within the Catholic pillars, the second emancipation was also powered by their agenda.

During the same time period, the Second Vatican Council positioned the Catholic Church in a dialogue with other religions, and declared for the first time that salvation outside the church was a possibility. Theologians such as Karl Rahner, Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx were bridging differences between Catholics and non-Catholics. The ‘aggiornamento’ announced by pope John XXIII produced a heady atmosphere among the intellectuals of the Catholic Church. The years after Second Vatican Council became a time of experiments, democratization, the ‘breaking of taboos’ (a national hobby at the time) among Dutch Catholics. There was a general expectation that everything would be different in the years to come, that they were only now truly liberated to unite as Christians with other believers, to conceive of themselves and others as ‘God’s people under way’.

The New Catechism (Nieuwe Katechismus) that appeared in 1966 exemplifies this ‘new élan’. Instead of a set of questions and answers which taught the central tenets of Catholic belief, this Catechism expounded in general and very optimistic term on the nature of Man, God, Christ, forgiveness, and love. Although this Catechism is not promoted by the Catholic Church in the Netherlands any more, many Catholics who were active at that time keep a copy at home and feel that it expresses their beliefs better than the Catechism approved by pope John Paul II that was published in 1992.

We are the church

This enthusiasm came to a peak during the pastoral ‘council’ (the name, and therefore its status, was controversial) in Noordwijkhout. This pastoral council took place in several sessions from 1966 to 1970. In the spirit of democratization prevalent in Dutch society at the time, the church hierarchy had little say in the overall proceedings, but were rather instructed to listen carefully to the views developed during these sessions by the enthusiastic lay believers and young priests. The aim was to give shape to the local Dutch church, the next step in bringing the church up to date. During the Second Vatican Council, archbishop of the Netherlands Alfrink had played a key role in formulating the importance of the local church as relatively independent from Rome: the pope should be no more than the first among equals rather than the source of infallible pronouncements that should be followed by all Catholics everywhere (Schaik 1997:chapter 9). In each country, the Catholic Church should find its own way of interpreting Christianity in accordance to their needs and insights. In keeping with this spirit, active lay Catholics combining forces with the younger clergy were claiming speaking time in this process.

During this pastoral council, in 1968, the long awaited papal pronouncements on sexuality and birth control were published in the encyclical Humanae Vitae. For the Dutch Catholics gathered in Noordwijkerhout, this encyclical was a terrible disappointment. It went against the practice and ideas as they had been developed in the previous years in the Netherlands, of considering sexuality in the light of sound
psychology and personal responsibility rather than in terms of sin and commandments. It explicitly forbade the use of contraceptives and condemned homosexuality, sex before or without marriage etc., although the language is less condemning towards other ways of life than Casti Connubii,

‘The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life’ (Humanae Vitae Paul VI 1968:paragraph 11).

The encyclical left no doubt as to the authority of these words:

No member of the faithful could possibly deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law. It is in fact indisputable, as Our predecessors have many times declared, (1) that Jesus Christ, when He communicated His divine power to Peter and the other Apostles and sent them to teach all nations His commandments, (2) constituted them as the authentic guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law, not only, that is, of the law of the Gospel but also of the natural law. For the natural law, too, declares the will of God, and its faithful observance is necessary for men’s eternal salvation. (3)(Paul VI 1968 paragraph 4)

Nevertheless, the participants of the pastoral council continued on their path to organize the Dutch church according to their own lights, referring to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that gave them the right to interpret Catholic doctrine according to their own needs and insights.

The discussions and turbulence generated at the pastoral council in Noordwijkerhout caught the attention of Catholics worldwide and prompted pope Paul VI to write a concerned letter to archbishop Alfrink, asking the bishop what Rome could do to help reinforce his authority (Schaik 1997:435). But the Catholics gathered in Noordwijkerhout were confident: they were putting the ideas of Second Vatican Council in practice, they were forging their own, democratic, open and inspired local church. Such was their confidence that they sent archbishop Alfrink on a mission to Rome with the message that the Dutch thought it was high time to change the obligation of celibacy for priests.

Alfrink went, against his own personal best judgement but in keeping with his views that each province of the church should develop its own way of interpreting Catholic doctrine, Rome received his message frostily and promptly developed a policy of appointing the most conservative bishops it could find to administrate the rebellious Dutch province.

Roman machinations and political activism

The first of these appointments (1971) was that of bishop Simonis to Rotterdam, who in 1983 moved on to become archbishop of Utrecht. The second of these, and with drastic consequences for the Netherlands as a province of the Catholic Church and especially
the diocese of Roermond (Limburg), was the appointment of Gijsen. If Alfrink and Dutch Catholics in general could still think of the first appointment as an unfortunate incident, with the second the message was becoming clear: Rome did not like the way Catholicism in the Netherlands was heading.

After his appointment, Gijsen speedily developed a policy of marginalising all ‘progressive’ Catholics in his diocese and dismantling the results of the process of democratization. The relations within the college of Dutch bishops became severely disturbed. Gijsen and Simonis, backed by Rome, usually managed to get things done in a way that was contrary to the insights and wishes of the other bishops. The Dutch Catholic church became a hopelessly polarized church at least on the level of the formal hierarchy (see the sometimes emotional descriptions in Auwerda 1988; Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995; Haenen and Verweij 1985)

Despite the growing polarization, and the frosty attitude of Rome towards Dutch Catholicism, the democratic spirit of the pastoral council led to a growing political awareness among active Catholics. This awareness gave rise to many organizations and even political parties that were characterised by a commitment to pacifism and social justice (e.g. Pax Christi and PPR\(^{10}\)) (Dijk, Huijts et al. 1990; Schaik 1997 Chapters 10 and 11). The spirit of ‘aggiornamento’ that had gripped Dutch Catholics during the pastoral council (despite Humanae Vitae) intermingled with the political notions of change that motivated many people and social movements outside the Catholic Church as well. The welfare state was at its height, and this led to the expectation that with a concerted effort ‘social ills’ such as national and international inequality, warfare, sexism and racism could soon be a thing of the past. It was simply a matter of raising awareness and empowering and organising the oppressed. Among active Catholics, liberation theology became an influential framework to formulate a global connectedness uniting against social ills and fighting for justice and equality. It has been said that at this time, the church might have been emptying at an alarming rate (in 1979, 30% of those who had been raised Catholic had left the church (Dekker 1997:52)) but at the same time there was a tremendous proliferation of small groups where lay Catholics, lay pastors and progressive priests would get together to organize celebrations, educate themselves, raise awareness and promote causes such as feminism, world peace, and social justice.

The Catholics committed to these ideals saw themselves as the vanguard of the future, a force for progress, whereas the neo-conservative faction within the church in their eyes represented an understandable but unrealistic attempt to return to the past, backed by a Vatican, especially the Roman Curia, that is normally a few hundred years behind current affairs. The polarization in the church would resolve itself once the reactionary forces saw the inevitability of progress. According to Winkeler the

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\(^{10}\) ‘Politieke Partij Radicalen’, a party founded by radical Christians in 1968. In 1990 they became part of the Green leftfist party, Groen Links.
polarization within Dutch Catholicism only came to be fully expressed at all levels and a prevalent issue in the consciousness of lay Catholics with the visit of the pope in 1985 (Winkeler in Borgman, Dijk et al. 1995:95).

After the shift from ‘moralising to psychologizing’, we might summarize the shift in the dominant discourse in Dutch Catholicism that took place subsequently as a move away from the ideal of a hierarchical church and society underpinned by a ‘timeless’ theology based on ‘natural law’. In its place came the ideal of a ‘democratic’ church and society, legitimated by a historically situated approach to theology and the bible as exemplified in the work of Schillebeekx and linked to the emergence of movements for greater social justice worldwide. At the same time, forces for restoration within Dutch Catholicism were organized into a distinct church-political faction backed by Rome.

The visit of the pope and the emergence of a distinct countermovement

In accounts of the visit of John Paul II to the Netherlands in 1985, it is often contrasted with the visit of the pope in 1953, celebrating the centennial of the re-instalment of the official hierarchy of the Church in the Netherlands. In 1953, the streets were full, and the church presented itself in its most magnificent splendour. In 1985, the streets the pope drove through were conspicuously empty, while the Malieveld in The Hague was conspicuously full. Progressive Catholics had gathered there to protest against the preparations of the papal visit. During these preparations, any attempt by progressive Catholics to present their concerns to the pope was stifled. After more than a decade of polarization, they wanted to grab this chance to present their concerns again: the stalling process of democratization in the church, the ordination of women, the obligatory celibacy of priests, lay participation in mass, the conservative Catholic teachings on sexuality and ecumenism. After being marginalized during the preparations, they decided to hold their own impromptu meeting, to show the pope ‘the other side’ of the church in the Netherlands. Out of this gathering the ‘8th of May Movement’ (8 mei beweging) was born. For many years, this movement bundled all progressive forces within Dutch Catholicism.

During the years after the visit of the pope, it became more and more clear that the pleas of the 8th of May Movement, although it could count on the sympathy of many Catholics, were falling on deaf ears within the hierarchy of the church. Dutch bishops were primarily held accountable to Roman policies, while the topics close to the heart of progressive Catholics who wanted to bring the church ‘up to date’ were forced to the margins of the church as an institution. The gap between the Catholic Church and the general moral outlook and worldview of Dutch Catholics became ever bigger. In 1996, Dekker et al. came to the conclusion that Dutch Catholics were actually less orthodox in

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20 The Malieveld was the site of many large demonstrations in those years, notably against nuclear weapons.
their beliefs, had less trust in their church and did not think the Christian tradition was very important for the safeguarding of morality and were much more liberal in their moral outlook than the general Dutch population (Dekker 1997:57-76).

In 2003, the 8th of May Movement disbanded due to a lack of volunteers and young people willing to take over. When he announced the news, chairman Henk Baars admitted that on the level of church politics, their movement had not had a lot of success. According to Baars, the forces of restoration have gained the upper hand in determining church policy in the Netherlands and worldwide21.

5. CATHOLICISM IN LIMBURG

There is not a lot of research on the history of Catholicism in Limburg. Generally, the developments within Dutch Catholicism were followed or even instigated in Limburg. Since the Catholic pillar encompassed practically the whole social world of people in Limburg, the charges within this pillar had a huge impact on the local landscape. Historical descriptions of the developments within the church as an institution such as those compiled by Nissen and Ubachs had to rely primarily on the biographies of individual clerics (Nissen 1996; Nissen 2000; Ubachs 2000). The summary of developments of Catholicism in Limburg below is based primarily on their overviews, as well as on journalistic accounts and folklore studies (Wijers 2000; Wijnands 1998; Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981)

The diocese of Roermond, geographically equivalent to the present day province of Limburg, emerged out of the diocese of Liège (nowadays situated in Belgium) when Limburg was split up between the Netherlands and the new state of Belgium in 1839. At first, it was officially an ‘apostolic vicariate’, until the reinstatement of the church hierarchy in the Netherlands in 1853. Limburg is unique in the Netherlands in that it has historically been almost exclusively Catholic: from 1809 until 1947 it hovered between 95 and 98% (Knippenberg 1992:174).

The Catholic Church in Limburg from the nineteenth century onwards was characterized by a strong ultramontanism (in contrast to the church in Liège for example). Within the Netherlands, Limburg was the stronghold of Catholicism, the only fully Catholic province. Limburg was a mainly agrarian society, but from 1870 onwards, industrialization and the consequent urbanization produced a new class of impoverished urban labourers. At first, the Church had difficulty dealing with this new class of people. Traditionally, it saw itself as a provider of charity for the ‘natural poor’: old people, orphans, single women. The ‘new’ poor were classified as paupers, lazy and a threat to society: susceptible to Marxism. Although the papal bills ‘De Rerum Novarum’ (1891) and ‘Graves de Communi Re’ (1901) explicitly reacted to this situation


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by encouraging work that would promote social justice, these bills were given a
primarily conservative interpretation in Dutch Limburg. It was only when socialism
became a real threat, and secularization among labourers became apparent, that the
church reacted erecting organizations to promote the welfare of different groups within
an exclusively Catholic framework. Instrumental in the organization of Catholicism in
Limburg was the priest Henri Poels.

He promoted a vision of society as a framework for these organizations based
on the medieval ideal typical vision of society as consisting of estates (standen) and
professions rather than the Marxist view of society as consisting of different classes. Not
the emancipation of the labourers was the goal of these organizations, but to fill in a
perceived lack of moral leadership (Ubachs 2000:396-397). These organizations,
especially for the youth, were very successful in bringing practically every domain of life
within the domain and control of the church.

Thus, the fear of socialism gave rise to a strongly organized Catholic pillar,
dictating the rhythm to which everybody lived: 70% of the labour force in Limburg was
organized in Catholic organizations, even apart from the numerous brotherhoods with
their local chapters, societies for the promotion of large families, farmers organizations,
local brass bands, etc.

In the 1920ies, when the financial equality between public and ‘special’ (i.e.
religious) education became law, all public schools in Limburg where slowly brought
under the control of the Catholic Church. Until that time, the public schools had in
practice been Catholic, because everybody in Limburg was Catholic. However, the new
laws gave the church the opportunity to resist any influence from outside: it forbade
teachers membership of non-Catholic organizations and also discouraged people to read
too much, because they saw this as a threat to the purity of faith. This process continued
until the 1950ies. Many of the schools were run by congregations, and a council chaired
by the local priest oversaw the schools run by lay teachers. The types of schools again
mirrored the vision of society as consisting of estates: the gymnasium was for the elite,
the HBS for the bourgeoisie and the MULO for the children of labourers and small
entrepreneurs. For women, ‘housekeeping’ schools were set up.

As mentioned before, Catholics in the Netherlands have been characterized as
having a ‘frontier mentality’, and were bound by the sense that Catholics needed to
unite among themselves to be able to emancipate and overtake the Protestants. In
Limburg, this mentality was reinforced by the influx of ‘outsiders’ when the coalmines
opened in the south of Limburg around 1900. The people of Limburg were self-
consciously and proudly Catholic. From the nineteenth century onwards, moreover, the
bishop of Roermond had been someone ‘from Limburg’, confirming the identity of
Limburg as separate from the rest of the Netherlands; because of its homogeneously
Catholic population in a country dominated by Protestants, and because of its many
distinct dialects and traditions (Nissen 2000:82-83).
The percentage of ‘secular priests’ (as opposed to priests belonging to a congregation or monastic order) was very high in Limburg, higher than in the other provinces. This meant that the local diocese could enforce its policies very effectively on the local level. All in all, it is clear that the Catholic Church had by the 1950ies managed to make itself omnipresent in people’s lives. Children would go to church every day before school, adults at least once a week. Through the teaching and enforcement of sexual morality, the church penetrated into the heart of the family. Leisure time was spent within contexts organized by the church. Reading materials (magazines, newspapers, even libraries) were controlled by the church. ‘Religion’ was the first subject mentioned on any school report. Together with the elite, it enforced an authoritarian society, where the value of ‘knowing your place’ was considered most important. Some historians describe Limburg as a veritable clerocracy (Nissen 2000:86).

After the 1950-ies, the ‘clerocracy’ crumbled. Under bishop Moors, who became bishop in 1959, young critics of the church were given a chance to ‘modernize’ the organization of the diocese. Priests influenced by the new discourses tried to reorganize parish life in keeping with ideas of democratization and the importance of the personal conscience of people. Although received these changes enthusiastically, there was also a minority (about 10% of the priests in Limburg) that organized itself to resist the modernization of the church. One of these priests was Johannes Gijsen, who was later appointed bishop (Nissen 2000:93).

Meanwhile, in Limburg as in the rest of the Netherlands, the pillarized organizations were co-opted by the welfare state, and the influence of the priests on these organizations steadily became less, or at least different as they implemented their own democratic ideals. The number of callings dropped dramatically, and at the end of the sixties, beginning of the seventies many priests left the priesthood. On the other hand, the rise of the welfare state and the economic prosperity meant that more and more spheres of society emerged that resisted control by the church. In schools and hospitals, municipal councils and even in church affairs, professionalization and the generally rising level of education meant that priests were no longer seen as the ultimate authority on every subject under the sun.

Gijsen was a surprise appointment by Rome that ripped the Dutch church apart, and broke the heart of many liberal Catholics in Limburg. Since the restoration of the hierarchy in 1853, the procedure in the Netherlands had been that the diocesan chapter would give the pope a shortlist whenever a new bishop would have to be appointed. In 1973 this shortlist had been prepared after a careful consultation of Catholics at all levels of the church. However, the pope ignored the shortlist and appointed the young and relatively inexperienced Johannes Gijsen, known for his outspoken conservative views on the role and morality of the church. Gijsen then proceeded to dismantle every form of democracy and lay participation that had become institutionalized over the years (for an emotional account of this process, see Baar 1995; see also Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981).
Gijzen’s agenda, and later also that of archbishop Simonis, was to push the paradigm of the church as a sacred institution, with the ordained priest as the central figure for the administration of the sacraments to lay believers. Where liberal theology had deconstructed the theology of the sacraments by situating them historically and ethically, reframing them as ‘celebrations’, the paradigm of Gijzen saw the sacraments as the framework for an unchanging moral order propagated by an eternal church. His attitude was ‘love it or leave it’, something that went directly against the conviction that had grown among progressive Catholics, expressed forcefully during the pastoral council, that ‘the people are the church’. Gijzen however, referred back to the strong ultramontane tradition of Limburg: Rome is the church.

Many priests and pastoral workers in Limburg, as well as many of the orders and congregations working in the organizations left over from the pillarization, were steeped in the ideal of ‘the people are the church’, and had developed their ideas and pastoral practices throughout the ideological shift described in the earlier part of this chapter. This was also the way many priests and pastors had been trained at the renewed vocational pastoral and theological training school (HTP, later UTP) in Limburg. This institute trained people to become lay pastors, as well as those who would go on to become ordained priests. When Gijzen became bishop, he refused to employ non-ordained pastors, and set up his own seminary to train priests according to his paradigm.

Meanwhile, the emptying of the church pews and the out-flux of priests, as well as the professionalization of the pillarized institutions had irrevocably changed the place of the church in public life in Limburg to an extent that Gijzen proved to be powerless to change. In the eyes of many people, ‘Progress’ meant that the church should know its place, rather than the church dictating them to know their place. The resistance to Gijzen’s agenda was at times vicious, while Gijzen showed he was not afraid to use everything within his power to push his agenda (Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981:132-137, 151-152).

In the early nineties, Gijzen was replaced by Wiertz, who seems to promote cooperation with the more ‘progressive factions’ and a respectful involvement of lay believers, while at the same time adhering to a Rome dictated policy. In this policy, the ‘proper’ administration of the sacraments and the special status of the ordained priest is again a central issue and pastoral workers are only slowly and grudgingly allowed to work for the diocese. In later chapters, this issue will be discussed as it comes up during the interviews and around death and dying. Although the pain of the polarization is

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22 The reasons for his Gijzen’s resignation are vague (health), but generally people seem to think he had made too many enemies among the council of bishops of the Netherlands. In the background, a scandal about sexual relations between staff and students of ‘his’ seminary Rolduc also played a role.
lessening, it is clear that the forces of renewal have been contained within the paradigm of the hierarchical church as a sacred institution.

When Gijsen became bishop, he was sure that he could rekindle the ‘fundamentally Catholic’ nature of the people of Limburg. However, as historians and folklore specialists have pointed out, to the people of Limburg their Catholic identity is not so much bound up with the Catholic doctrine, but is rather a matter of adhering to certain traditions (Nissen 1996; Nissen 2000; Wijers 2000). Through his policy of training volunteers and integrating parishes, at the time of my fieldwork bishop Wiertz seemed to be a little more successful in making local communities care about their church again, if only because they want to prevent their parish church from disappearing altogether. At the same time, the diocese was also developing many initiatives for Catholic youth, latching onto the enthusiasm generated by events such as Catholic World Youth day. Following up via the Internet, it seems these initiatives are successful. For these young Catholics, the polarization within the church is usually not an issue that is part of their life world.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter I focused on tracing the shifts in the moral discourses of Dutch Catholicism via the existing literature on the subject. In so doing, I have of course bypassed many arguments and historical details: a history of Dutch Catholicism could fill a few volumes by itself. I have focused on those discussions that generated most controversy, and were most publicly fought. It is obvious that in this history the role of lay believers first increased and later decreased again as the Catholic Church polarized and became more marginal to everyday life. Church attendance dropped dramatically from the later years of the sixties onwards (Becker 1994; Dokker 1997).

During the immediate post-war years, the organizations of the Catholic pillar and the Catholic Church itself were determined to perfect the social and spiritual mechanisms by which Catholic believers could be kept safe from modernity. In this effort, the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ as a means to spiritually and socially exclude people was the cornerstone. However, at the end of the fifties, internal criticism started to question the iron logic of this mechanism. Many Catholic intellectuals wanted the Catholic Church to be more open to modernity, to political ideologies that strived for social justice, to other religions, to new developments in science. According to these intellectuals, the spiritual life of the Church, although rich in display, was poor in content.

The biggest ideological shift was prepared by Catholic intellectuals influenced by psychology, psychoanalysis and the French ‘nouvelle théologie’ during the late fifties. This shift emerged fully and became the basis of policy within the organizations of the Catholic pillar during the sixties and seventies. The church’s attempt to control and regulate sexuality became the main butt of criticism of the ‘spiritual liberators’. By positioning the psychological health of the individual as something that preceded a morally good and spiritually healthy life, the church was convinced to relinquish its
control over the individual moral life of believers to (lay) ‘professionals’. The Catholic policy to ensure ‘moral health’ shifted from the containment and control of ‘sin’ via the mechanism of the sacraments, to a policy that was based on openness and sensitivity to people’s psychological make-up to enable them to become more ‘fully human’ and inspire them to live as good Catholics. The professionals who succeeded the clergy in the many organizations of the Catholic pillar, came to see the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ itself as morally wrong.

An optimistic view on human nature came to dominate Dutch Catholicism, most fully expressed in the New Cathechism (Nieuwe Katechismus). This optimistic view was also translated into a political agenda as liberation theology inspired many Catholics to become socially and politically active and feminist critiques were launched within the Catholic Church as a worldwide movement. Democratization was the key word, promoting equality to realize the Kingdom of God on earth.

With the polarization of the Dutch church into a ‘progressive’ camp and a strongly Rome-oriented conservative camp, the forces of renewal definitively ground to a halt halfway the eighties, and the progressive camp has been losing power and membership ever since. The optimistic,-free style New Cathechism is now replaced by a more traditional, hard to read Cathechism in 1995, a translation of the Cathechism published by Rome in 1992.

The Catholics that were active in the renewals of the sixties and seventies are getting older, and attracting young people with the same degree of practical commitment is proving to be a hard task. Meanwhile, bishops who are held to strict account by Rome determine the face of the ‘official church’. This has resulted in a dual reality: the hierarchy maintains a conservative façade, and manages to stimulate mainly conservative seminaries, while a substantial part of priests, pastoral workers and volunteers in the church can be described as ‘progressive’ (for example, they see the church more as a community of believers than as a sacred institution and see pastoral abilities as more important than being ordained Bernts n.d.:72 see also; Watling 2001).

The ‘church as a community of believers’ perspective is more and more brought within the bounds set by the ‘church as a sacred institution’ paradigm and has thus lost its momentum to instigate further renewal and democratization. My impression during fieldwork was that the old activists simply do not find the fight worth fighting anymore, or feel defeated. To the younger generation, the message of Rome has been brought across successfully: if you do not like it, leave it. Do not try to change it. The contrast with the spirit of renewal of the sixties and early seventies could not be greater.

Although the Catholic Church in the Netherlands often presented itself as a ‘minority religion’ it was and still is numerically the largest denomination in the Netherlands. In Limburg, Catholicism has been the majority religion for centuries, and is closely bound up with the identity of ‘being a Limburger’. What this means will become clear in the next chapters.
For now, we can conclude that although the shifts from ‘moralising to psychologizing’ as well as the shift from ‘timeless hierarchy’ to ‘fluid democracy’ has taken hold among many Catholics and is closely linked to other trends in Dutch society, this trend has been deleted from the image of the ‘official church’. Rather, the ‘official church’ prefers to continue with the ‘righteous few’ that are left in its pews.
CHAPTER 3: NARRATIVES OF THE PAST IN WELDEN

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature on the changes within Dutch Catholicism and the secularization of Dutch society, the narratives of the believers who used to fill the pews of the churches do not really have a place. Of course, many narratives have been gathered in documentaries, in (auto) biographical books, and in fiction (Kerklaan 1987; Rooij 1999; Schaik 1997). But to my knowledge, there are no studies that systematically examine the narratives of lay believers on the changes within Dutch Catholicism to reflect on the nature of these changes and the consequences they have for the present day nature and place of religion in society. Furthermore, the narratives that have been compiled are usually not contextualized within the existing research literature, or within the local situation, or with regard to the practice of life in general. This chapter describes the ‘narratives of the past’ of the generation that was born before the Second World War in Welden. They came of age and had their families at the triumphant height of post-war Catholicism described in the previous chapter, and witnessed the changes that took place in Dutch Catholicism starting in the sixties.

This chapter will start with a comparison: on one side, there are the representations of ‘the past’ of active Catholic intellectuals who were part of the spirit of renewal unleashed after the Second Vatican Council. They emphasize that change was inevitable. This representation will be compared to the narratives of the elder generation: did they also see change as inevitable? Was their religious life really so unbearable according to themselves? (Sections 2 and 3). Section 4 will describe the ‘local face’ of the polarization within Dutch Catholicism, and especially the Roermond diocese. Section 5 describes the narratives that emerged when I asked the respondents to compare the world they grew up in with the present, in terms of values and lifestyle. Below, I will discuss some of the methodological difficulties I encountered in doing these interviews and analyzing them.

This structure was informed by the main topics I introduced during the interviews. But the subheadings of the paragraphs represent some of the themes and crystallizations of the general consensus that emerged from the stories of my respondents: stories of ‘inner rebellion’, stories of personal tragedies centering around the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ and two issues that were the subject of ‘moralizing’, especially for the women: the loss of community and the sexuality of young girls. Other subheadings were informed by expressions that summed up the general consensus within the community on the changes in the church and the polarization.

The narratives of this chapter, in combination with the ‘official’ history of Dutch Catholicism, provide the background to chapter 4, where present-day religiosity in local life will be situated and described.
Notes on methods

The term ‘Narratives of the past’, the title of this chapter, is intended to indicate that I take the stories that people told me not as the uncomplicated representation of attitudes and moral orientations in the past, but as the present-day result of a process of making sense of the changing historical landscape in which they lived their lives. The assumption is that the narratives expressed in the individual interviews are part of a body of *shared* narratives. Although they were at that moment created for my benefit, these narratives emerged and evolved throughout the contexts of interaction my respondents participated in: from discussions between husband and wife on how to raise their children, via conversations with a family member or close acquaintance who is a member of the clergy, to discussions among colleagues, neighbours, friends and community-members.

The interview material that formed the basis of the descriptions here resulted from 15 in-depth, open-ended interviews with respondents of the generation born before World War II, most of them living in Welden for the greater part of their life. The interviews lasted about two hours, sometimes longer. Often, I would also join them for lunch and informal conversation ensued (not recorded). Because I was mainly interested in people’s own narratives about the changing religious practices and moral orientations they experienced during their lifetime, I structured my questions loosely around the personal biography of the respondent. At the start of the interview I would ask people to describe to me the world they grew up in and the role of the church in their daily life. Questions on moral orientation would be elaborated from there, focusing on the role of priests and chaplains in their life, the changes in the church and local parish life, how they raised their own children, the widening gap between the doctrines of the church and general moral consensus in Dutch society, and the comparison between the past and the present. Although each biography is of course unique, the descriptions and interpretations of the changes showed many similarities.

For several reasons, I had some difficulty finding respondents. One reason was that some people were insecure whether they would be a good source of information for me, because they did not consider themselves very knowledgeable about ‘church matters’ or because they thought I was mainly interested in evaluating whether they were good believers. Part of the introduction was a reassurance that it was *their* story I was interested in, that I was not affiliated to the church. This established a non-judgmental context.

Another reason was that in Limburg rural communities, locals usually ignore non-locals as partners for conversation. When I started my research, the key informants I contacted warned me about this. Having grown up in Limburg, I was already aware of this difficulty. Walking down the road and greeting people in Dutch can illustrate this: many locals, especially older people, will not take the trouble to return the greeting. But greeting them with a local greeting using the proper tone and inflection usually gets a
response. Generally, locals assume that no outsider would be interested in them and their world. Anybody who is not part of their own familiar world is therefore ignored.

Furthermore, religion was a touchy and private subject for most people, both because of the polarization within the church and because of the control over the ‘purity’ of people’s beliefs and moral life that used to be exercised by the church.

Not only was it difficult to find the first respondents, the ‘snowball method’ of finding respondents did not work very well. Establishing trust with one person was not good enough to make the link to another person. The only persons that I was referred to using this method were those who were known to be extremely pious.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the fact that I am from Limburg myself turned out to be an important asset in overcoming initial hesitations. At first, the contrasts between myself and the respondents often created an almost insurmountable barrier: urban versus rural, old versus young, university educated versus an education that sometimes went no further than elementary school, someone from outside the local community versus someone from inside. However, as soon as I mentioned that I came from Limburg, people’s objections disappeared and their motivation to tell their story grew.

The reality of community: familiar domains

To understand these barriers, and also to understand why I claim that the narratives of these interviews represent shared ways of making sense of the past and the present, it is important to understand the sentiments that go with being part of a local community in Limburg, the ‘gemeinschap’, in dialect, ‘gemeenschap’ in Dutch. To the people of Welden and the surrounding villages, community is an irreplaceable and incomparable fact of life. Community is not only a feeling; it is a reality, a fact. Of course, this is so for many rural communities, but in Limburg it is part of an identity of ‘being a Limburger’ and therefore being ‘different’ from the rest of the Netherlands. The Limburg dialects, an important boundary marker, differ from one village to another. Only in contrasting themselves with ‘de Hollanders’ (the Dutch) do people from different communities in Limburg feel one (Wijers 2000).

It is impossible to simply go from one community to another and re-establish yourself the way people in urban communities might exchange one neighborhood for another. Entering another community you will be more or less accepted, and after about ten years you wil be included in informal relationships of general reciprocity. But people will still remember that you came from somewhere else, the demands you can make on general reciprocity are smaller, and the frequency and ease of contact will be less. One cannot choose the community one is a part of, and one cannot compare communities because they can only be known from the inside.

In the next chapter I will refer to this reality of community as the ‘domain of the familiar’ because to the post-war generations, the feeling of community does not necessarily refer only to the local community but can be established with anyone who has grown up in the south of Limburg. It is rooted in local history and for many
inhabitants of the small rural villages encompasses the local community, the 'gemeinskap'. In some ways, it is synonymous with the term 'life world' as it is used by social scientists inspired by phenomenology. However, I prefer the term 'familiar' because it more accurately expresses the affective nature of this world. It is not just the domain of communicative rationality as described by Habermas (Habermas 1991 [1987]), it is the domain that people in Limburg refer to when they say that they are 'different': they are different from the next village, different from the people above the rivers because they root themselves in the familiar, but not because of any particular cognitive content that remains forever unchanged (Wijers 2000:113).

This reality of community life also made it hard for me as a researcher, aside from the political difficulties of the community of Welden mentioned in chapter I and further explained below. I could signal my understanding of the importance of community, but I could never be a part of it. In the narratives of the past presented below, this feeling of community played an important, usually implicit role, perhaps even more important than the church.

Reflexivity

Reflection on my own position as a researcher and how I related to the people who told me their stories was a very important factor in choosing how to treat the interview material in creating this chapter. At first, I felt lost: on the one hand, there were many common narratives that painted more or less the same picture. On the other hand, there were some very personal, painful and private stories. I thought these latter stories provided no basis to generalize on, particularly because my respondents felt that these painful stories happened only to them, that nobody else had had these experiences, and they did not want these stories to become public. But then, why did they tell them? And why did they sound so familiar to me, why did it seem I had heard them so many times already? Why did I immediately recognize the pain that they felt?

In Kahn and Cannell, the dynamics of an open-ended interview are compared to the therapeutic interview, since in both situations it is especially the non-judgmental context created by the interviewer that encourages the respondent to open up, by eliminating the need to defend oneself (Kahn and Cannell 1967:70-75). This non-judgmental context is unusual in daily social life, and in my experience it does indeed lead people to open up and start to enjoy telling their stories. Besides, dwelling on memories and personal opinions builds up its own momentum, and creates an atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy between the interviewer and the interviewee.

In the interviews I conducted, this dynamic had the effect that people sometimes opened up more than they had expected themselves to open up, especially the women. They told of personal and sometimes very painful events in their lives in which the church had been involved in a rather nasty way. It was especially in telling these stories that people became concerned about the anonymity of the interview.
Although I reassured people that I would guarantee their anonymity, I did not quite know how to handle the responsibility that came with being entrusted with these stories. Somehow, the very private nature of the grief expressed in these stories asked for a response, a connection that extended beyond the interview situation. I recognized their stories because my family from my mother’s side comes from Limburg (although not from Welden). But to redress the balance was impossible: ultimately, the intimacy created in the interview situation is a false one, whatever the common ground between interviewer and interviewee may be. There is a definite power-relationship present in the interview, since it is the interviewer who defines the context and the purpose (Kvale 1996:126). Besides, I did not plan on sticking around to help them, as a friend, to come to terms with these stories. Even if I would have been in a position to do so, I was much too young to take on that role for them anyway.

So I felt guilty for being entrusted with these stories without being in the position to reciprocate this trust. Although one might argue that open interviews grant more space to the respondents to set the pace, context and topic (as opposed to structured or closed interviews) the sense of empowerment that comes from ‘telling one’s own story’ can quickly turn into a sense of deflation when attention turns once more to the day-to-day life. Although I tried to end each interview with more reciprocal talk, letting them question me about my life and background, it was hard to shake off this feeling that somehow, I had tricked them into telling me details of their life they had not wanted to reveal by using my own knowledge and background.

In writing this chapter, I decided to leave out those stories that were obviously still painful to tell for my respondents. Instead, I pay more attention to some stories that were very similar, but were less painful for the respondent to tell. In fact, they were part of the repertoire of stories they wanted to tell and it was noticeable that they were already polished and smooth, they had been told more often. The incidents around which the painful stories revolved will only be mentioned in passing.

Whether they were still painful or not, they have in common that they show another, individualized, side of the coin of the shared narratives about the past: they concerned events that people had tried to forget because they were too shameful, or too painful or both, related to the mechanisms of control by the church. These stories were similar to those in the collection of letters edited by Marga Kerklaan (Kerklaan 1987). These letters were written by Catholic women from all over the Netherlands in response to a television program discussing the question whether the church’s rules on sexuality could be seen as the cause of the massive emptying of the churches starting in the sixties.

So even though they seem private, shameful and extremely individual, they do show an important side of the moral dominance of the church in their life: its power to keep the suffering this dominance caused out of the public domain, its power to summon mechanisms of social control to its cause, and how deeply these mechanisms are instilled even now, in the way my respondents censored their own stories and felt shameful.

51
To summarize these considerations: the analysis of the interview material implied teasing out the common narratives from the interview materials. I take these narratives to be the result of inter-subjective processes of ‘making sense’ within the community of Welden and between the interviewer and interviewee. In this chapter, the main themes that emerged in these narratives are described in relation to what has been written about changing religious practices and moral orientations in Dutch Catholicism in the past fifty years.

2. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST

Reading the written historical representations cited in chapter 2 one could almost believe that most, if not all, Catholics were involved in the changes they describe, caught up in the climate of renewal that prevailed after Vatican II. As I mentioned in chapter 2, many of these historical accounts were written by progressive Catholics. Most of them share the view of the ‘spiritual liberators’ that the changes in Dutch Catholicism were an inevitable consequence of the dissatisfactions widely felt among lay Catholics in the Netherlands and in Limburg. This representation of the state of Dutch Catholicism as the end of the fifties also dominates a report commissioned in the late fifties by the diocese of Roermond (Huijs 1960). This report signalled a growing dissatisfaction with the church, and especially with the authoritarian relations between the clergy and lay believers and the ‘deadness’ of ritual life. It mentioned the growing alienation between priests and the faithful, summed up in the expression ‘the church belongs to the priest’. It concluded that beliefs were badly internalized, that there was a growing revulsion against ‘moralising’, and a tendency to relativize the rules and regulations of Catholicism rather than understanding them as timeless and absolute, especially with regard to sexuality.

Significantly, this report is mostly based on interviews with local professionals: social workers, teachers, doctors etc.. Although this report ties in with the descriptions in the previous chapter, it throws little or no light on how things were perceived at the ‘grassroots’ level. Of course, it is also doubtful whether one can speak of a ‘deteriorating’ level of Catholicism: was faithfulness to the Church in a better condition before? In every era, people complain about moral standards losing their timeless and absolute certainty, and there is no reason to assume that relations between the priest and his flock were rosier in previous times, or sexual mores more in line with the church guidelines. In fact, it was only in the organizational efforts developed in the twentieth century that these guidelines came to be implemented more uniformly among all Catholics, and they were able to enforce their regime consistently.

However, what can be concluded from reading this report is that the ideals of the growing class of professionals in the south of Limburg conflicted with the closed and tightly organized Catholic world regulated by the clergy, and that the diocese had resolved to give these dissatisfactions a place in its decision making by commissioning a social research in which not only the clergy was represented. This was a revolutionary change. Still, the world in which people in rural Limburg lived was Catholic in all its
aspects and even those complaining professionals clearly wished to remain Catholic as well, they just wanted to ‘let in some air’.

This report was brought out before Vatican II, and if it really does accurately indicate the mood among professionals in Limburg at the time, it is not hard to understand why the changes announced by pope John XXIII were enthusiastically welcomed and developed by the Dutch Catholics (see previous chapter and Coleman 1978). Taking these descriptions as a point of departure, one would expect the pre-war generation of Welden to have some narratives of the dissatisfaction with the church they had felt at the time when the Catholic regime was still firmly in place. That they, too, had felt that change was inevitable, that things could not continue the way they were. Alternatively, one could assume that being raised before these changes, the older generation would be critical of present day society and later generations.

Neither of these assumptions turned out to be correct. In the narratives of the older generation, it appears that in the late fifties nobody could have predicted that the closed Catholic world they knew would change so radically, nor that the church would end up taking such a marginal space in the public sphere, and often also in the private sphere of people’s lives. As they remember it, it was a time when conforming to be a good Catholic was very important. Obedience, honesty, good manners and knowing your place were the prime values. ‘Stubbornness’, talking back and lying were severely punished.

The first part of the interviews would tell the same story again and again. All school children had to go to church every morning before going to school, the children who had to come from the outlying hamlets walking miles on an empty stomach. They would discuss their teachers, the friars and nuns in the boys’ school and girls’ school, and how strict or friendly they were. They mentioned that ‘religion’ was the first and most important subject on the report cards from school. They remembered the merits you could collect by going to church regularly during the week and on Sunday, and the rewards if you had collected enough merits. They told me proudly about the uncle who was a priest and what he would say about the children, that those who went to a convent school had ‘better manners’. They memorized going to confession every fortnight and not knowing what to confess and the trouble they would get into because of being ‘wilful’ or disobedient.

They remembered how important the doctor, the dentist, the mayor and the priest were. How far away and unreachable. How happy but at the same time fearful they would be when one of these important people paid attention to them. In adolescence, they remembered the courses for young adults they attended, taught by the Redemptorists; how they fired up their faith, and warned them of the sins they could commit. They joked about the bewilderment about the exact nature of these sins: ‘we thought you could already get pregnant by a little kiss!’ The fun they used to have as girls among each other. The bewilderment some of the men had felt when they noticed that priests or friars were not as holy as they appeared to be and made sexual advances towards them. How poor people were, how hard life was, how big the families. How
they used to pray in hard times, how their mother taught them to pray, and how it helped them to be able to bear those hard times, and even the war.

These stories of Catholic childhood and young adulthood are comparable to those told by the immediate post-war-generation or those born during the war. Embarrassed, some people would comment that I had probably heard all those details many times before. Their stories were matter-of-fact descriptions of things that were so familiar to them that they sometimes did not know where to start describing. They did not give any opinion about it, except to apologize for not being able to explain things better, why things were as they were. When I asked how they felt about it, if they thought it was good or bad the way things were, they would shrug their shoulders and say: ‘that was just the way things were. The times were different then, you did things for different reasons’.

What they described was a stable society, where everything was fixed, everybody knew his or her place. Where the ‘people of the underside’ smoked and played cards at the back of the church and got pregnant before marriage. Where the ‘decent people’ sat in the pews, the most important in front. Where children were seen but not heard, where widows wore mourning for a year when someone in her family died. But in these narratives there is no sense of a growing dissatisfaction naturally leading up to the changes in the sixties. Rather, as we will see later, my respondents saw these changes as appearing quite suddenly.

*Inner rebellion: you do not go to church for the priest, you go for God*

Nevertheless, criticism of the church and the clergy was common, particularly among the lower classes. This was expressed in jokes and set expressions, such as the joke about the priest saying to the mayor: ‘if you keep them poor, I will keep them stupid’ (‘houd jij ze arm, dan houd ik ze dom’). The proximity of the mines offering employment opportunities to many men of the rural communities meant that even in Welden socialist criticisms of society made some converts.

Some respondents told how they resented the intrusion of the church into their lives. However, it rarely made a difference in the behavior of outward compliance to the conventions dictated by the church. Nor did any narratives emerge wherein people described themselves as taking the initiative to change things. Criticism and rebellion would be defensive and leave the status quo intact. There was no place to go, no movement to link up with, where their criticisms could be heard. Social ostracism threatened those who openly defied the moral order of the church. The few ‘reds’ were seen as God-less and immoral men.

In the interviews, only one man was openly critical about the efforts of the church to imprint its moral authority on peoples’ lives. He attributes this critical attitude to his experience in the army, fighting in the Indies for the Dutch government against the independence movement. The men coming back from this colonial struggle (which people in the Netherlands still never refer to as a ‘war’, but as ‘police actions’) were
often disillusioned, both because of what they had seen and experienced there, and because they did not come back as heroes: the Indies became the sovereign state of Indonesia, gaining independence from the Netherlands in 1949.

‘When I came back from the Indies, we had a chaplain who was very fanatical. He organized all these groups, and my mother wanted me to join. I ended up at a prayer group. They were always talking about sin and confession, in a very heavy manner; it mattered a great deal to them. I thought: ‘well, you talk, I will not mind’. Then the chaplain asked me: ‘Hub, you just came from the Indies, how did you think about these things over there?’ So I said: ‘Let me tell this to you Mr. chaplain, I’m most sorry about the sins I did not commit’. The chaplain was furious! [Laughs] He also had these attendance charts, which you had to take every time you went to attend the prayer group, and they would put a stamp on it for you so you could prove your attendance. I did not like that. When they asked for my chart, I said: ‘I will buy a ticket when I go to the cinema, but not when I go to church!’ I had been in the East for three years, and there you learned not to agree with everything other people thought was the right thing. … Three days later, he [the chaplain] was at my mother’s house when I came home from work. I looked at her face and I saw that something was wrong. I thought: what is he going to complain of now. And then it came out: ‘you’re so wilful, and contrary in your behaviour, and now this thing with the chart, I do not like it’. He was an authoritarian, thought that he could dictate people. ‘I really do not like it’. And I said, ‘well, one thing is important Mr. chaplain, and that is whether I like it. And I do not like your pathetic little clubs, so you will not see me there anymore. But I will not interfere, and I will not go to another church’ [i.e. he would continue attending the parish church rather than going to another church, which would be an open act of rebellion]… That was something that I really did not agree with: that the priest, along with the mayor, acted like they were the conscience of the community. It’s a good thing that it’s not like that anymore.’

This man had recourse to other frames of reference, which put the church in a different light than the other respondents -even now-, saw it. He saw the mechanisms of control clearly, and resented them: the charts, the house visits, and the ‘examinations of sin’. He was an exception to the rule, and even he presented his description of the Catholic world he grew up in with the words: ‘that’s the way it was, we did not think of questioning it’. His rebellion was against the chaplain, not against the church or its doctrines.

He was one of the few men who said that he had had the feeling that things were going to change soon, that the church could not continue like this, that people would not accept this kind of control for much longer. Generally, there were very few stories in which people openly challenged the authority of the church, even when it was
exercised in a way that was very painful or even destructive to their personal life. Consider the story of a miner’s widow who got pregnant before marriage:

She broke off her engagement to the son of a rich farmer when she fell in love with another boy, from a poor family. Her mother refused to give her consent to the marriage. Nevertheless, she sought employment in his village to be nearer to him. They were engaged for years, seeing each other occasionally, whenever her boss allowed it. But their parents did not allow them to save any of their salaries to be able to set up a household together. One day on their Sunday walk they could no longer ‘contain themselves’ and she got pregnant. Although they barely had ‘a cup and a saucer’ to eat from, the only acceptable solution was marriage.

Her mother made it a point to let her daughter know how much she felt that she had disgraced the family: she ordered coffee with buns and flowers to give the marriage a more ‘decent’ appearance, and then sent the newly wed couple the bill, which they could not pay. She also told her daughter that she went to put the bridal flowers at a statue of Mary to pray for her sins. The parish chaplain too, made his disapproval clear: when the couple had found a house to rent, he decided the house should be given to a more ‘worthy couple’ who had been engaged for a long time (without getting indecently pregnant). The landlord went along with the interference of the chaplain.

Later, when her husband had found another house, he made sure a contract was signed immediately. When the chaplain again tried to prevent them from moving in, on the grounds that it was not appropriate for a miner’s family to live on the posh main street, he found out he was too late.

When I asked her whether she was upset at the church for causing her so much trouble, she replied:

‘Yes, for some time, I refused to go to church. But my husband would always say: you do not go to the church for the priest; you go for God. And of course, he was right’.

During her marriage, the priest would often come by to enquire when the next child would be due. They did their best to ‘live naturally’ (not using periodic retention or other mechanisms of birth-control), and had ten children.

In this story, we can see how the church could rally social pressure and disapproval. Although this woman and her husband were convinced they were justified in wanting to set up a household together in the face of so much disapproval, she did not question the general principles on which the church was acting, even in the retelling of the story to me. In fact, her personal faith, but even more that of her husband,

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23 Although this is the kind of ‘painful’ story that would inadvertently come out, this particular narrative was obviously well worked out and had been told many times before. She clearly wanted me to hear it and retell it.
sustained her against the social disapproval she faced and helped her conform. One reason why she was able to stand up to her mother was that she reasoned: ‘if God is love, that means he wouldn’t want us to suffer like my mother is making me suffer by not letting us get married’. Her husband would tell her that they were not to blame for the shameful wedding, because they had tried to live decently for years, trying to win approval, so it was ‘they’ (their parents, other authorities) who were to blame for the breakdown of decency.

In these narratives, it seems the church’s insistence on adhering to the moral rules invoked the countermovement of a personalized, purer faith that did not care about appearances and that turned towards prayer and the saints for strength. Men would often emphasize that it was especially those who would outwardly adhere rigidly to the rules of the church that could not be trusted, or who would be the most malicious gossips and mean spirited people. This was expressed in cliche’s like ‘the thickest-skinned people always sit in front [in church]’. And with these men too, ‘love’ and the lack of it (perhaps these days we would call it a lack of empathy) was the criterion by which they judged people and the enforcement of church regulations.

In these narratives, personal faith gives the power to be able to ignore or circumvent social conventions by pointing out that the ‘right spirit’ was lacking. However, the legitimacy of these conventions is not denied, even now.

The sacraments and personal tragedy

The painful stories that came out during the interviews usually had to do with the (threat of) exclusion from the sacraments wielded by chaplains and priests. Although it was not my aim to elicit stories that would rouse up painful personal events, they were significant in the context of my research. They contrast sharply with the general efforts of the narratives of the past that people tried to impress on me: that although the past might seem ‘bad’ by present day moral reasoning, ‘it was just the way things were’, a state of affairs nobody had an opinion about. The painful stories show how this state of affairs was created and maintained, and the casualties that fell by the wayside in maintaining it. Instrumental to enforcing this state of affairs was not only the cooperation between the church and the ‘notables’ of a community, such as the mayor, landlords and the doctor, as in the story of the miner’s wife above, but also the threat of being excluded from the sacraments. The causal chain of events implied by this exclusion was instilled in people from elementary school onwards.

Exclusion from the sacraments meant that one was living in a state of sin. Living in a state of sin meant that if one should die suddenly, heaven (and the church graveyard) would be closed to you. In the same vein, children who had not had the stain of original sin removed by baptism were barred from heaven and had to be buried outside hallowed grounds. Some people remember being taught to do emergency baptisms to prevent this tragedy, especially during the war.
Some of the key-informants I interviewed (usually professionals of a younger generation who will be cited in the next chapter) would relish telling stories of women who were refused absolution (getting the shutter, see chapter 2, section 2). After ‘getting the shutter’, a woman would often not dare to go into church during mass again. The key-informants who were eager to tell these stories are firmly on the side of progressive Catholicism, and they used these stories to explain their allegiance to the liberal faction, and to condemn anyone using the image of a ‘punishing God’ to bolster church authority.

However, most of the respondents central to this chapter did not use these kinds of stories to argue their own position with regard to the church. They did not relish telling these stories. Rather, they had wanted to forget about them, treating them as painful personal experiences.

One woman told me that her mother had had twelve children and then she got pregnant again. She miscarried, and the baby had to be buried in the middle of the night, outside the graveyard, a painful event that everybody kept silent about. Her father resolved that there should be no more pregnancies. After some time, the priest enquired with her father when the next baby would be due. When he replied that in his opinion they had ‘done their duty’, the priest said: ‘where twelve can eat, there must be room for a thirteenth’. Her father got angry and for the first time in his life disregarded the suggestions of the priest.

Although priests reportedly would always push for more children, among themselves women apparently had different standards: in the interviews they would comment on the inconsiderateness and lack of self-control of the husband of a woman worn out with too many children: ‘he should have the sense to leave her alone’.

‘They [the clergy] made it impossible for us’, is an often-heard expression. Although husband and wife would try to comply with the rules that the priests and chaplains instilled in them, in retrospect they all agree that in the control of sexuality and in childbearing the demands this placed on women often surpassed the boundaries of what was bearable.

3. CHANGES

Not surprisingly, the changes with regard to birth control were welcomed as a relief. Nobody thought it a good idea to return to the days when birth control was forbidden. This, indeed, was seen as inevitable, and bishop Bekkers is fondly remembered by these people (see chapter 2). Not only did he tell people that it was their own responsibility to decide the number of children they would have, he also allowed that the church had been too harsh and insensitive in forcing parents to bury their unbaptized babies outside hallowed ground.

Other changes within the church, however, were not seen as inevitable. Significantly, when I asked about Vatican II in relation to the changes in the church and church life, I would get a blank stare. When I mentioned some examples that would
have had an immediate impact, such as the switch to Dutch and the priest celebrating mass facing the parish, they would say: ‘oh, yes, we had to get used to it’.

But there was one issue that people could get quite indignant about, even now: the loosening in the behaviour of priests. Although during the interviews they all agreed that priests were human too and should be allowed to marry, they remembered that at the time, it was quite a shock when priests started behaving more informally, and stopped presenting themselves as a-sexual, superhuman authorities on everything to do with God, heaven and hell. Perhaps because people felt that the church had placed such heavy demands on them, there is a strong sense of indignation in the narratives about clergy who ‘suddenly’ did not live according to their own rules anymore in the sixties and seventies. It caused people to look at the obligations and restrictions of the church with more scepticism:

‘Three chaplains got out [left the clergy], two got married, and people were saying: hey, what’s this, what does the church have to say about our life, why should we go to church every morning? Many people were really upset about it. So those two got married, and the priest would also go out sometimes, among the people. So people would comment: look at him, he’s carrying the young girls’ handbags [they would give it to him when they were invited to dance]. But for me, I would say: so what? He was a priest who was among the people, but it doesn’t mean he had anything more to do with those girls.’

Apparently, the authority of the priests and chaplains to enforce the rules of the church was in part based on their morally superior ‘special status’, apart from normal people. They inhabited a territory that could not be entered by normal human beings, and this had imbued the obligations of the church with a magical power that was suddenly lost when the clerics lost their special status. What is interesting here is how they became human in the eyes of people: because they married, because one was holding the handbags for the girls. Their moral superiority was based on their vow of celibacy, their incredible feat of sexual purity. One man told me that he advised his mother not to listen to the clergy anymore. He had been to a seminary, and saw the young priests in training go out with their girlfriends at night.

The reasoning in this narrative follows the logic of a bargain: if the clerics abstain, you have to comply with the rules of the church, if they do not, why should you? If the clerics were not keeping their end of the bargain, it was voided in the eyes of the people. This is borne out in the way the parish priest of Welden mentioned above retained his authority, but in a different form: although he mingled with the people and was not shy of women ‘he did not have anything more to do with those girls’. Other women mentioned dancing with him, emphasizing that ‘nothing happened’.

‘They cancelled everything’

What people remember much more clearly than any of the other changes (such as the switch from Latin to Dutch) is the time their children came home and told their parents
that the chaplain had said that they did not have to go to church if they did not feel like it:

‘When the children were smaller, you noticed that church attendance lessened. They would come home reporting that the priest or the chaplains had said that if they really did not want to go, they were not obliged to go. But before, you were simply not one of the decent people if you did not go. Everybody would look at you. But from that time onwards (late sixties, early seventies), people started minding less about those things’.

In all the narratives, the obligation to go to church was a universally accepted fact until the priests and chaplains told people otherwise. One did not wonder whether to go or not, because everybody went. Of course, they would be bored, or reluctant, hungry because of the fasting, would like to sleep in on Sunday mornings or go to soccer practice. But not going was not a real option; in the way that not going to school is not really an option. When this obligation lost its ‘factuality’, it caused quite a surprise.

‘In the sixties, many things have changed, also in the church. Suddenly, everything was allowed, everything could be done differently. If you could not go on Sundays, you could go on Saturdays, or during the week. So those changes came from ‘up’. It would never have occurred to me not to go on Sundays. I guess they decided in those higher realms that it was nonsense for some reason, but those were the times that everything changed very fast, and everything declined’.

The lady speaking here goes from the general to the specific by focusing on a seemingly irrelevant detail: from ‘everything could be done differently’ to: ‘if you could not go on Sundays, you could go on Saturdays’. Apparently, the obligation to go to church shaped local community life to a very great extent, and when this obligation was lifted, local community life declined.

As we can see in both quotations, the changes are perceived as something that came from above, not as something that had to do with changes in how they themselves thought about things. An expression often used in commenting about this is: ‘they cancelled everything’ (‘ze hebben alles afgeschaft’). Inherent in this comment is a sort of fatalism: all the efforts they had made to live up to the standards of the church were apparently null and void. When I spoke to them, they were not angry about it anymore. However, it did leave a residue of resentment against the church. And of course, this dilemma was usually resolved again through the motto: ‘you go to church for God, not for the priest’.

The expression ‘they cancelled everything’ also implies a criticism: the church used to give shape and a shared rhythm to community life, demanding that everybody joined in this rhythm, and even threatening those who did not with spiritual and social exclusion. And now the church has abandoned this role. The threats turned out to be empty. Some people complained: ‘they fooled us all those years’. Furthermore, by relaxing the rules of church attendance, they upset the rhythm and the continuity of
passing this rhythm and the way of life going with it from one generation to another, undermining the efforts they had made to get their children to attend church, undermining one of the most important foundations of the local community. No longer was appearance in church an indicator of whether or not one belonged to the ‘decent people’. The church’s function as a social gathering place and foundation for social control was irrevocably undermined.

According to some, the emptying of the churches is ‘their own fault’; ‘they’ (the clergy) ‘gave’ people their freedom too suddenly and too fast. However, according to most respondents this is not particularly tragic for religious life, because they believe that even those people who do not go to church regularly, whether of their own age or of a younger age, still ‘have their own faith’. This is seen as legitimate enough: there is no need anymore to submit to the authority of a church and attend regularly to prove that you are a decent person.

As we saw earlier, the older generation did not wish to describe the role of the church in their childhood as bad; it was just the way things were. When they changed, it was confusing, as described above, but in some ways also a relief. At least, none of my respondents thought it would be a good idea to re-introduce the obligation to go to confession regularly, to keep condemning birth control, clip people’s personal freedom or enforce the rule of celibacy for the clergy.

None of my respondents had a problem in dealing with people who had a different background of faith. And although their opinions on abortion, euthanasia, anti-conception and sex before marriage were usually a little bit more conservative than that of the younger generation, they usually thought these things should be entrusted to people’s own responsibility. Even the most ‘conservative’ among my respondents, followed this line of reasoning when it came to individuals, to her own children and grandchildren.

‘I live like I was taught. About the youth, I say, if they want to live together [i.e. without being married, KK], should I close the door on them? No, I would never do that. I let them live their life, with my warnings.’

The introduction of birth control was a good thing, whatever the opinion of the church was about the subject, but people think it should be reserved for married couples who already have a few children to prevent it from becoming an excuse to ‘live carelessly’: in their opinion, the rules of the church and social conventions should be followed out of intrinsic motivation rather than because of external enforcement.

In their moral orientation and evaluation of others, they started with the consideration that if a deviation from the ‘normal’ pattern of living can be squared with one’s own consciousness, it is acceptable and should be respected by others.
4. Polarization

In the previous section, I described how some of my respondents blamed the changes in the church that came ‘from above’ for the decline in community life. The church was no longer the self-evident centre of local life. But another important reason for the decline of community life and parish life in Welden, and especially for the separation of the two, was the polarization in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. This polarization started with the appointment of Gijsen, as explained in the previous chapter, and was particularly strong in Limburg, the most Catholic province in the Netherlands. As a result of Gijsen’s appointment, all initiatives towards liberalization within the church were stalled.

On the level of local communities, the impact of this polarization varied. Probably, in some cases it was not felt at all. But in the case of Welden, it was felt very strongly, especially when their parish priest suddenly died in the early eighties, and was replaced by a priest sent by Gijsen to ‘restore order’ in Welden. The previous priest was a known opponent of Gijsen, and much loved by his parishioners.

So far, there is no reason to assume that the people of the village where I did my research share a very different horizon of meanings from the people in the other villages of Limburg. However much they like to emphasize that they are very different, telling about the fights that would break out between the young men of different villages, trying out: the different pronunciations of some words in the dialect of this village or that, they are different in the ways soccer clubs are different: they might fight, but it’s still the same game, with the same rules.

However, not all local communities in Limburg were confronted by a priest sent by Gijsen. To know what this means, we have to put this event in the broader perspective of the Roman policy to call Dutch Catholics to order described in the previous chapter. On the level of the local community, the shock of Gijsen’s appointment was often not felt immediately, because local priests and chaplains would continue to follow the agenda they had already developed. Progressive Catholics found safety in numbers: the bishop might not agree with them, but they were convinced that their pastoral policy was supported by the people and by the dominant trend in Dutch Catholicism. They were simply implementing progress, giving a more humane interpretation to Catholic doctrine in keeping with the true spirit of the gospels.

In the longer term, Gijsen’s appointment did have an impact on the level of parish life because of the sanctions Gijsen used on those priests that according to him were too liberal. To use Berger’s metaphor: Gijsen’s agenda was to repair the ‘sacred canopy’. He wanted people to accept the authority of the church as a self-evident fact of life again. He appointed priests that he could count on to carry out this policy, created his own seminary, banned pastoral workers from working with the diocese, and hounded the clergy who were too liberal in his eyes (see the sometimes emotional, and usually adversarial descriptions in Auwerda 1988; Baar 1995; Nissen 2000; Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981).
'Among the people' versus 'above the people'

In Welden, the priest sent by Gijzen caused a lot of upheaval. In describing the consequences, most people tried to keep their narratives neutral, although some would still get very upset about it. Everybody agreed that the controversy over the new priest tore the local community apart, causing personal hurt to many people. To this day, it is a sensitive topic and people are careful in expressing themselves about it.

Whatever side they took, they all used the same expressions to describe the difference between the ‘old’ priest and the priest sent by Gijzen: the previous priest stood ‘among the people’ while the new one wanted to be ‘above’ the people. It was not so much theological differences that caused controversy; it was the hierarchical attitude of the new priest. The old priest encouraged people to participate actively in the church; the new one wanted to do everything ‘by the book’. The old priest would discuss, ask for their opinions, ‘think ‘with’ his parishioners; the new priest wanted people to follow his orders, had no interest in the opinions of his parishioners, saw his role as thinking ‘for’ them. The old priest enthusiastically embraced the renewals initiated within the Dutch Church, inspired by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the new priest tried to restore the old order, where the priest ruled his parish like a little kingdom.

The new priest took his orders from Gijzen: to re-establish the vertical dominance of the church in the community of Welden. This meant that a lot of people, especially those active in organising community life and the church, felt they were being ‘reduced’. Until the late fifties, they had been accustomed to think of themselves as deferring to the authority of the church. Through the efforts of the old priest to give shape to the renewals in the church on the local level, they had learned to consider the church as belonging to the community: they had to give shape to the local religious life, as Alfrink had argued so convincingly at Vaticanum II. In contrast, the new priest made it clear that the church was his territory and that he had come to ‘restore order’ in the community. In his view, not only the church building was his territory, but the whole parish, virtually synonymous to the whole community. To many people, this amounted to an attempt to ‘turn back the clock’.

This affected mostly the younger generation, while most of my respondents of the elder generation kept themselves outside the controversy. However, this was virtually impossible. For example, one respondent told me how the new priest undermined the leader of the local choir of the elderly, a known progressive Catholic. He told everybody that she was not a good Catholic, and not fit to lead the choir, and he forbade her choir to choose their own songs. After some hesitation, unused to openly going against the authority of the priest, the whole choir decided to support her.

One particularly vicious fight broke out when some parents decided that they did not want their children to have their Holy Communion with him. He had told everybody that the Holy Communion of the previous year was ‘not valid’ because there were some parents near the altar when the host was consecrated. This made many parents angry, and they enlisted the help of a nearby monastery. To other parents, the
solution of going to the monastery seemed a bad idea: they refused to ‘give up’ on the parish church. Not because they liked the new priest so much, but because they reasoned that it was their church, the symbol of their community, they had grown up with it, they had done their first communion there. They did not plan to let themselves be chased away by a difficult priest.

The parish priest condemned the role of the monastery as meddling in the affairs of his parish by providing misguided people with ‘a way out’, to escape the territorial boundaries of the parish instead of staying there and being forced to solve their disagreements with his policy. The monastery in his view encouraged disobedience to the moral authority of the Catholic Church. He compared the role of the monastery in this affair with the role of monasteries in the province of Brabant in the past, where they served as a refuge for criminals sought by the secular authorities.

So these were the terms of the debate on both sides: it was not just a difference of opinion, but a drama with villains and heroes. A drama in which people were expected to take sides. Although this particular conflict involved especially the younger generation, the whole community was affected.

In retrospect, everybody saw it as inevitable that the community did not accept the rule of the new priest, but in the more detailed accounts of the ‘acts of war’ between the two camps it is obvious that it was by no means certain whether people would cede to the priest’s authority or resist it. Some people were relieved that this priest, at least, acted ‘proper’ to his status. Everybody agrees that he does the church services ‘beautifully’. Probably, most people did not want to take sides, a painful step in such a close community.

The attitude of the new priest not only caused personal feelings of hurt and conflicting loyalties, but also caused a separation between the local village associations and institutions and the priest. The local priest was often the one with the first and the last say on the board of the village associations and the local school. With the old priest, this had developed into a network of cooperation between the societies and the church, with the priest in the role of encouraging facilitator. When the new priest came, he had a more authoritarian attitude, because he was of the opinion that the previous priest had let things slide too much. He believed in the role of the priest as the person who should enforce the moral rules of the church as conservatively as possible, and use every sanction available to him. This, according to everybody I interviewed, regardless of their personal opinion of the priest involved, had disastrous results.

The priest did not succeed in ‘reconquering’ the parish to be more obedient to the church; instead, the community and village societies relinquished the parish church to his authority and kept the rest to themselves. The ties between the village societies and the local elementary school on the one hand and the parish church on the other were cut, contact was reduced to a very minimum. At the time of my research a reluctant and precarious truce had been established between the warring factions, and
most people had learned to describe the conflict in neutral terms, only revealing their own sympathies as a side comment.

Those who got along with the priest, had decided to call his ‘above the people’ attitude a lack in ‘social skills’, preferring a continued formal role of the church in their personal life and community life to rebellion. Many people of the older generation simply stuck to the motto that had already served them for so long: ‘you do not go for the priest, you go for God’. They would recognize the rift in the local community he had caused, but comment in his favour: ‘he does the rituals really beautifully’.

When I told people I would also interview this priest, my respondents were worried and protective, and would advise me: ‘well, he has his opinions, but don’t mind him’. When I asked whether, as a non-Catholic I should or should not participate in the communion they would say: ‘who cares if you’re Catholic or not? Just don’t tell him’. Clearly, the moral consensus of the community has nothing to do with the rules of the Catholic Church the new priest was so eager to enforce (see also Watling 2001).

Nowadays, the appointment of a young conservative priest would have much less impact than in the seventies and eighties, when it was still a matter of course that the local priest would have a large say in everything going on in the community and Gijzen was gathering steam in his attempt to reform the diocese of Roermond, consecrating new priests that implemented his agenda.

The older generation saw the lessening of the obligations of the church as the main cause of the decline of community; while those who are or were active in the village societies saw the division caused by the priest as the main cause for its decline. The conflict generated is noteworthy because it is evidently an issue where people felt that important values were being violated. They had been accustomed to thinking of the church as the centre of community life, but now it proved to be divisive. In the next chapter I will further elaborate this issue, because it was especially the post-war generation that was involved in this conflict of values.

Clearly, the territory over which the priest can exercise his authority had been reduced to the church and its rituals. Community life evolves regardless of the priest. Even though his status as a priest might give some additional weight to his words, his authority outside the church is ultimately based on his credibility as a person. Except one or two respondents, none would accept it if a priest would take the attitude of the chaplain in the story of the miner’s wife, or in other ways try to lay down the law outside the bounds of the physical building of the church itself. Even in the eyes of one of the more pious respondents, the status of the priest changed:

‘It used to be that the priest was regarded the way we regard the pope nowadays, as someone who was far above you. Now you can just say hi to him, he has become a normal person’.
However in the next chapter we will see that the gap between ‘official church doctrine’ and informal moral consensus can still be problematic in the context of the rituals most people in Limburg feel they cannot do without.

5. COMPARISON OF PAST AND PRESENT

Before starting fieldwork, I expected that when I would ask the older generation about the contrast of what they were told was supposed to be right and proper with the present day situation, it would elicit detailed stories about how they came to terms with these discrepancies. Usually however, this question was felt to be a challenge to explain the moral regime of the past. But the past was felt to be inexplicable, at least to me: ‘well, that’s just the way it was, we did not think of questioning it’. This seems to indicate that my respondents found it hard to explain that there was only one accepted way of living, whereas now more lifestyles are possible. This answer might also implicitly admit that, with hindsight, one could argue that they should have questioned things: according to present-day values many things that were taken for granted then, have changed to accommodate more room for personal freedom and well-being, for equal rather than authoritarian relationships, or are delegated to the realm of personal responsibility.

However it should be interpreted, this answer made it difficult to ask more questions, because it shut off the door to comparison: it is useless to ask for opinions on things that just ‘were the way they were’. So I also asked more explicitly how they had dealt with the ever-widening gap between the moral prescriptions of the church and the newly emerging moral consensus according to which many things that were considered sinful in the past have become accepted part of people’s lifestyle, such as birth control, homosexuality, intermarriage with people of another faith, mixed schools etc. However, mostly people just shrugged: they said they had not experienced it as problematic. In their own life, they had lived more or less according to church doctrine and how others, including their children and grandchildren, live was up to them as long as they were not drug addicts or alcoholics and did not betray their spouse.

Rising welfare and loss of community

Nevertheless, after the initial answer that would lead nowhere, people did mention that they worried about: the decline of the local community and the increasing loneliness of many people. Of course, there is always the cliché that ‘in the past, everything was better’. But when we take a closer look at the way these worries were framed by the lady cited below, we can see that they imply a perspective in which generally, the present is normally seen as an improvement on the past.

‘The times were very different then. But still, I think, people have never been lonelier than they are now. They have all the modern comforts, and they know it all, but still... before, you would go to church, and you naturally formed groups to walk there together [she lived half an hour away from the parish church in a little hamlet]. And when you went back, you would go into
someone's house to have some coffee... and now, you have TV, at night the curtains are closed and that's it, finished...

In this narrative it is clear that her thoughts on the subject of the decline of the role of the church in local life had already crystallized: she knows the underlying reasons for the objections other people might make, and gives us an insight into the context of meaning in which she formulated them. She starts with the universal opening statement for any comparison: 'the times were very different then'. Often, as mentioned above, this was followed by: 'we did not think of questioning it'. However, she does not say this. Instead, she says: 'still'... the indicator that according to the general opinion, to which she is referring to frame her own opinion, not only were the times different, they were apparently different in a negative sense. We can see how they were different in a later sentence: 'they have all the modern comforts, and they know it all, but...'. So the present is an improvement on the past in terms of knowledge and in terms of material comfort. Viewed from the vantage point of present-day values, which they assumed that I share, the past was indeed 'bad' because you were not supposed to question things and living standards were lower. But it was also 'good', because community life was stronger.

Narratives about their children

In the previous, we can already see that although the older generation gave their children a Catholic upbringing as a matter of course, they say that they respect their children's prerogative to live life according to their own insights, also when this means loosening ties with the church or converting to another religion. Most indicated that their children did not go to church regularly anymore, although, according to their parents, they 'believe in their own way'.

In retrospect my respondents admitted that it was not good to force children to go to church. When they described the way they raised their own children, they emphasized that they did not force them to go to church, but proudly told of the times when their children went out of their own initiative. However, from the actual stories and anecdotes they told of their difficulties in raising their children, it is clear that they did try to enforce the obligation as best as they could. Although the obligation to go to church regularly lost its self-evident character, it was still the norm that should be enforced, if not through external punishment, then through internal motivation.

In their narratives about their children, the emphasis is on internal motivation. The older generation does not seem to think that people have become less religious, or less 'morally upright' because they do not go to church anymore. They trust their children to 'think for themselves' and cherish the moments when they see that religion is important to them also, especially when they decide to have their own children baptized despite being estranged from the church. In the next chapter, I will return to this issue.
Sexuality

A strong exception to the understanding tolerance with which the older generation viewed the younger generation, is the way older women see the sexual behaviour of young girls. The contrast between the way that they were raised and young girls behave nowadays is something they cannot empathize with. This behaviour, which they see as indiscriminately ‘sleeping around’, goes directly against their notions of what is right and proper. As young girls, they had been trained on how to deal with men down to the smallest details:

‘The chaplains would warn us against the things that boys would try to do. Otherwise, you wouldn’t know what happens to you. But nowadays, they act very differently; it is hard to understand how this came about. We wanted to go to the altar ‘pure’. We were taught to be careful, and to respect the boy. Because he is not made of stone! And if you were not pure, you had to have the honesty to say: no, I will not marry in white.’

Parental control and the teachings of the church were accepted as helping to prevent ‘occasions for sin’. Young girls were taught specifically that it was their responsibility to check where the hands of the boy would stray. And the social exclusion that threatened when one failed to comply, was something to be feared as real and painful, as we saw in the story of the woman who got pregnant before marriage. The following monologue gives more insight into the reasoning and the emotions involved in their view of young girls now:

‘If you “had to” marry [because of pregnancy], that was really bad. Then, boys had a very different feeling for a girl. Of course, sometimes it happened, but those were the people from the ‘underside’ so to speak. But now, they go with each other, and I find it really offensive that the girl is not appreciated. But of course, there are some girls who lower themselves. They invite trouble. We used to dress nicely, but nowadays they walk around half naked, what do you expect! How can a boy not go crazy? Look, if you bare yourself, a boy will think: hey, that’s an opportunity. But if a girl is decent, and lets him know that she doesn’t like that kind of behaviour, everything is fine. Also for the boys. Look, they are not bad really, but they are tempted. I read it somewhere in a magazine, that they said: well, if you would dress properly, we wouldn’t behave like that [i.e. badly] either. And the fashion trends reinforce this. And, well, those girls just comply. And that stuff they swallow nowadays. It went wrong when they started using the pill. In itself, the pill is a good thing, but they should just give it to the women who already have a few children. But a young girl should keep her body in honour. Well, I’m just saying it the way I see it. You were always told: this is bad, that is bad, but still, we had a lot of good times. And if some boy would say: ‘come, let’s go into this alley’, you would just say: ‘are you crazy?! Why don’t you go alone, what should I be doing there?’ And he would know, ok, it’s not possible... because that’s the way we were taught, you know, with the seven healthy apples? How did it go again... if there is only one rotten, the rest is lost as well (een rotte appel in de mand is de rest tot schand). A bad girl more easily takes down seven men.
with her than seven men can convince one girl. They will not be able to do it.
With our own children, we really had to weigh things. My husband would
say: you cannot leave them alone. But you should also take their own
responsibility as a point of departure. But if you leave them alone at night, of
course. From one thing comes another.’

This monologue is very interesting not only because of the view of men it expresses
(poor things!), but also in the moral outrage she feels, which was shared by most
women, mingled with disgust, at the way girls ‘lower’ themselves, and the rhetoric with
which this outrage is expressed.

Among the women of the elder generation, chastity was clearly a deeply
ingrained value, not just a ‘front’ to keep up. The vocabulary to describe the differences
in sexuality, relationships between the sexes and the body ties in with this: ‘honouring
your body’ and being ‘appreciated’, or ‘lowering yourself’, recognizing that he is not
‘made of stone’ versus baring yourself and causing bad behaviour, staying ‘pure’ and
honourable versus a ‘fallen state’ associated with ‘the people from the underside’.

At the time when they were old enough to be courted and get married, long
engagement periods were normal. ‘Remaining chaste’ would become more and more a
challenge as affections grew. Nevertheless, none of the women who talked about this
issue saw any reason for the sexual mores to become more liberal. They emphasized that
the long engagement period was also a test of character for the boy, because if it turned
out that he could not abstain during their engagement, how could you expect the
marriage to work when she would not be available for sex because of childbirth? This is
connected to the view discussed earlier that a man should be ‘considerate’ with his wife
and exercise enough self-control not to get her pregnant too often or too soon after the
lastborn.

In the last part of the above monologue, we can see the bargaining taking place
between the value of respecting her children’s personal responsibility and the deeply
ingrained anxiety born of the urge to protect their chastity.

Formulating chastity as a ‘challenge’, and chastity itself as a way of honouring
the body was apparently such a matter of course to these women that even the privacy
sign of ‘personal responsibility’ could not keep them from strongly feeling and
expressing their incomprehension and distaste at the behaviour of young girls. When it
came to their own children and grandchildren, they wanted to believe and trust that
they would behave responsibly, that they did not kiss or have sex ‘just like that’. But
even while expressing this trust, reassuring themselves by telling me, it was obvious
that they simply could not understand it.

The men would invariably comment on the topic of the celibacy of priests, but
keep away from the subject of the sexual behaviour of present day youth (I do not know
if this is because they did not have such strong opinions about it, or because I am a
young woman). They were unanimous in judging the celibacy of priests an unrealistic
demand, breeding sexual deviancy.
6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The difference between the narratives of the previous chapter and this one is important to note: in chapter 2, change was perceived to be the inevitable consequence of the shortcomings and closed character of pillarized Catholicism. In the narratives of this chapter, change was something that was previously inconceivable to most people, however heavy the demands placed on them by the church.

In chapter 1 I cited Bourdieu’s ‘practice’ approach to signification as a phenomenon that has to be understood as a part of a ‘universe of practice which is different each time: usually implicit and always self-sufficient, ruling out the possibility of comparison with other universes’ (Bourdieu 1977:122). For most respondents, the local community of Welden is the ‘universe of practice’ within which the narratives presented here have to be understood. In this local universe, the church and the clergy were influential in shaping the landscape and practices, but they also emerge as an ‘outside’ force with its own, unassailable logic. People also had their own moral standards of what was right and wrong, standards that were governed more by a logic of the heart and personal relationships. Turning to concepts such as ‘God is Love’ and telling themselves that ‘you go for God, not for the priest’ as well as personal prayer gave people the strength to withstand this outside force while conforming at the same time. Some, such as the man who fought in Indonesia, found strength in wider horizons to stand up to pressure, others found this strength in their personal faith.

Except on the issue of birth control, my respondents presented no narratives of impending and necessary change. Their narratives of change emphasize that it was not they who changed, but the clergy. Their narratives of change mostly focus on the behaviour of the clergy and the breaking of the rhythm of church life. There are no narratives that explicitly describe an awareness and criticism of the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ as intrinsically wrong. This is in contrast to the professionals and active community members of the younger generation who are central to the next chapter. But it does tie in with what Thurlings found: that a considerable amount of Dutch Catholics did not participate in the renewals at all, and another part were more motivated by docility and obedience to church authority, whether conservative, progressive or neo-conservative, than by a desire to change things (Thurlings 2004:39).

The stories that respondents told of incidents that involved the mechanism of the sacraments, were mostly considered painful and embarrassing, rather than an illustration of an ‘inhumanly strict’ church regime as progressive Catholics would see it. In many cases, they were not formed into narratives about the church; they were simply seen as personal incidents. It makes one wonder how deeply embedded this mechanism of the sacraments still is, how important to moral orientation. Logically, if the elder generation still believed in the doctrine of sin, confession and absolution one would expect this generation to be very worried about the younger generation and their own children: will they go to heaven, or be damned? But they were not, far from it.
One could speculate that the iron logic of the old moral regime of the church was broken by the reasoning that developed in commenting on the change of behaviour of the clergy. In the old regime, the clergy were the gatekeepers of heaven: they heard people’s confessions, they dispensed or withheld absolution, they were in charge of the sacraments that underpinned the moral order as shaped by the Catholic church and the Catholic pillarized organizations. In the narratives about the change in the behaviour and status of the clergy, the absolute authority on religious and moral matters is certainly doubted to a great extent. Another reason might be that the pronouncements of bishop Bekkers on the fate of unbaptized children and other painful issues lessened the force of this logic.

Ultimately, it is impossible to dig to the bottom of this issue; there might have been other ways of reasoning involved that did not come out during the interviews. However, the fact that to many respondents the personal incidents that involved the mechanism of the sacraments were still so painful and embarrassing could indicate that the hold that this reasoning used to have over people’s imagination has not disappeared completely. As we will see in the next chapter, the mechanism of the sacraments still exerts its force in some contexts.

Generally, the Catholic doctrine of sin the pre-war generation had been taught during their youth were not the standards by which they evaluated later generations and present-day society. In their narratives, there is no sense that the way people live now is intrinsically wrong and sinful, however different it is from the way they were raised, except where it concerns matters of chastity. Even in expressing their concerns about the sexuality of present-day girls, the women were not concerned about the state of the girls’ souls; rather they were worried that these girls were not ‘appreciated’ and treated with respect. The elder generation seemed to accept that the general moral consensus had moved on and out of the bounds of the morality of the church. They did not see the role of the church as the institution that should tell people how to live, rather the church should encourage reflection and contemplation of God and the saints.

In the confrontation with conservative priests this diminished role of the church crystallized. The general consensus seems that nobody seriously considered accepting the authority of the church as a given again. Although people were reluctant to condemn the pre-Vatican church as bad, attempts to ‘restore’ the past apparently were not appreciated either. Although the elder generation did not want to take sides for the most part, on some occasions they explicitly chose against the new priest. Nevertheless, they did not see the controversy this new priest generated as a reason not to go to church anymore.

On the level of institutions in Limburg, the polarization between the neo-conservative agenda of Gijzen and the movement of progressive Catholics was fought out in very acrimonious terms (Auweda 1988; Baar 1995; Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981). However, the attitude of my respondents would often be something like: let them [the clergy, KK] discuss and decide those things among themselves. But with the appointment of conservative young priests in the local communities of Welden and
some surrounding parishes, the polarization was reflected in the struggle about their influence with the curriculum of the local school, the village societies, what they told children in preparation for their first communion, etc. In Welden and some other local parishes in the surrounding areas, this thoroughly divided communities. When I did my research, everybody was anxious to consign this dividedness to the past, since the memories were still painful and they were afraid that the fights might flare up again. On the institutional level, due to the appointment of a new ‘moderate’ bishop, cooperation between institutions that had broken down completely during Gijzen’s reign is being restored.

Nowadays, the disapproval a neo-conservative priest can earn by invoking the mechanism of the sacraments is sometimes just as great, if not greater, than the disapproval and social exclusion a young woman had to face if she got pregnant before marriage. In the next chapter, this will be elaborated. This chapter has focused on the changes within the Catholic Church, and especially on the changes in the moral discourse of the church, from the perspective of the local community. From this point of view, it becomes clear that the changes in discourse in themselves were less important than the changes in behaviour and organization they inspired among the clergy who were responsible for the local parish church. Although the narratives of these changes in behaviour and organization express the shock that people felt, and worry about the decline of community, they also express an acceptance of the newly emerged ways of moral orientation. The role of religion in these contemporary ways of moral orientation will be examined in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 4: FAMILIAR DOMAINS BETWEEN SECULARIZATION AND SACRALIZATION

1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapters, I described some important changes in the Catholic discourse on morality that emerged from within the Catholic pillar on a national level, and the way local people ‘on the ground’ reflect on these changes. From the comparison between these two chapters, the significance of ‘practice’ to religiosity and moral orientation became clear: it was only when the changes in discourse were translated into a change in practices on the local level that the pre-war generation remembers that their own religious practices and moral orientations started shifting and the place of the church in community life and the mechanisms of social control changed irrevocably. This chapter links the focus on the ‘religious past’ of the previous two chapters to the descriptions of present-day religious practices and moral orientations in the next two chapters.

Throughout this chapter I develop the argument that the nature and place of present-day religiosity, and the significance it has for moral orientation, is best understood as the result of an ambivalent relationship with religious authority, or even authority in general. This ambivalence, however, should not be seen as indicating that religious authority does not matter at all, that it is only ‘the Self’ that is accepted as a source of legitimation and authority. Instead, religious authority is always evaluated in terms of its relationship to the domain of what I have called the ‘familiar’; that which is known, secure, predictable, family, friends, the local community.

This means that present-day religious practices should not solely be understood as the outcome of individual processes of choice and bricolage, but as the result of careful negotiations with religious institutions and between generations in which the moral integrity of the domain of the familiar and its values is weighed against the moral and religious power and authority of (institutionalized) religion.

During my research, I noticed that there were many narratives of how the values of the domain of the familiar clashed with the exercise of religious authority by (usually young) priests. Section 2 focuses on these stories, to show how past and present religious practices and moral orientations come together in the emotional minefield around death and dying. This will lead to an exploration of the attitudes of the younger generation towards the religious past and towards the church in their own life and in community life in section 3. In section 4. I give a sketch of the wider changes in Dutch society that have reshaped and secularized life in the rural area of the south of Limburg, focusing on the notion of ‘progress’ that also emerged from the interviews with the pre-war generation in the previous chapter. Finally, section 5 and 6 will situate Christian and alternative ‘religious repertoires’ within this local landscape as sources for the ‘re-

\[ See the connotations of ‘familiar’ on the first pages of this book. \]
signification’ of traditions and as ‘consumer options’ of religiosity, sacralizing the domain of the familiar. These sections also introduce the two religious contexts described in chapters 5 and 6. Whereas chapter 5 and 6 will focus on an ethnographic description of these religious contexts, in this chapter I will show how they are part of the local landscape how they fit into local (community) life.

Note on methods

This chapter is based on material drawn from every context of my fieldwork: the interviews with the elder generation of Welden, interviews with key informants in Welden, the Pastoral Centre and the Spiritual Association of the Hills, and (participant) observation in these three contexts. Furthermore, I used historical, ethnographic, sociological and journalistic literature to situate and flesh out the impressions from my own fieldwork. Because the aim of this chapter is to give general descriptions of the local landscape, the way it shapes people’s lives and the way they navigate it, the descriptions are less detailed, more generalizing than in the other chapters\textsuperscript{25}.

2. Rituals around death and dying

Understanding why a funeral can become a source of conflict is a useful way of gaining more insight into the place of traditional religious practices and the church as an institution in present day Limburg. Several generations, secular professionals (the doctor, the nurse, the undertaker) and religious institutions are thrown together in a situation where they have to agree on a way to shape and express what it means when someone dies. Traditionally, all these actors converged within the ritual domain of the church. But as we shall see, this domain is not taken for granted anymore. As a consequence, differing moral orientations and role-definitions come into conflict.

In Welden and among the visitors and volunteers of the pastoral centre\textsuperscript{26}, some of the most ‘morally charged’ narratives referred to the behaviour and attitude of priests with regard to the last rites. Mentally, I labelled these narratives the ‘bad priest stories’ because they involved a strong stereotype of usually ‘young'\textsuperscript{27} neo-conservative priests; ‘Gijzen’s priests’. One subject of these stories was the parish priest of Welden, who also figured in the narratives about the polarization of the local community in the previous chapter. The history of extreme polarization on the local level might be particular to Welden, the narratives about ‘bad priests’ displaying callous behaviour in the way they handled last rites were not confined to Welden.

\textsuperscript{25} In some parts I have had to be vague about my sources to further protect their anonymity.

\textsuperscript{26} These visitors and volunteers were usually from one of the villages surrounding Welden and sometimes, though rarely, from one of the old mining towns or from another province.

\textsuperscript{27} They were called ‘young’ relative to the middle aged mostly liberal priests and the very old priests educated in pre-Vatican II times. However, some of the priests figuring in these stories were in fact not so young at all, but their career had only taken off after Gijzen came to power.
The persons telling these stories were usually women. They described their experiences with the arrangement of the funeral of a loved one as a process in which they had to ‘haggle’ with the priest about the extent to which their own input would be allowed. Hagglng about the form a funeral should take is not something people enjoy when they have just lost someone dear to them, so these narratives were not only morally, but also very emotionally charged.

These narratives do not only give insight into the place and meaning of the church and of its ritual practices, they also show how the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ still has a role in contemporary religious life. On the one hand, there is ‘the church’, whose rules for the last sacraments, funeral mass and other services surrounding death are clearly and conservatively stated on the diocesan level: the priest has the responsibility to protect the sacred acts of Catholic ritual from dilution. His role and the importance of the sacraments cannot be replaced because it is fundamentally different from that of lay people. In morally controversial cases where the deceased has clearly died ‘unrepentant’ of his or her transgressions of morality as defined by the Catholic Church he should even refuse to perform the sacramental acts. However, these rules have been heavily contested in the past by the liberal Catholic faction, and are in practice often ignored or circumvented by the less strict priests.

On the other hand, there are the demands of a family whose grief may seem overwhelming. No: giving in to those demands can be seen as the most cruel act a priest can commit in his entire career. Besides, in their perception the family members have the heavy responsibility to protect the memory of the deceased and act according to his or her last wishes, e.g. to have a ‘proper Catholic burial’, pass away having received all the sacraments, or to have a burial service led by a priest who is a friend of the family. The parish priest is in the position to refuse to carry out these wishes: he can say that the dying person is not fit to receive the sacraments, he can refuse to hold a ‘proper’ mass, he can refuse to let the old family friend perform the burial service.

Finally, there are the ‘professionals’ surrounding death and dying: the undertakers, nurses and doctors who have to make sure that the demands of their profession to be efficient and ‘cost effective’ do not hurt anyone’s feelings, and who have to develop their own ways for dealing with the emotional turmoil of death and dying.

When I asked them, all these actors agreed on what constitutes a ‘good death’: a process in which the person has the time to say goodbye to everybody, make his peace with God and die in his own bed having received the last sacraments. Subsequently, the family members and the community can entrust the dead person to ‘the care of God’ through the ritual of the funeral mass. And they all saw the same problems, even the priest I interviewed who was himself the subject of several ‘bad priest’ stories.

Traditionally, receiving the sacraments of the sick and the celebration of mass at a funeral are seen as obligatory for a ‘good death’. To die with unconfessed sins might mean that the soul of the deceased can not enter heaven. But nowadays, these once ‘automatic’ routines are dependent on the relationship of the dying person and his or
her family with the parish church and with the church in general. If the relationship is not so close, people often hesitate to ask for a priest when they fall sick: they don’t want to bother a stranger, who also has a certain status, to come unless someone is really on the brink of death, and then he has to come immediately. Some people might bear a personal grudge against the parish priest and wish for another priest to do the last rites for them. Often, the dying person and his or her family are also afraid that calling a priest makes things doubly final. And finally, people are afraid that the priest might simply not come, because of some ‘sin’ they have committed in the past (as with women who ‘got the shouter’, people who are separated or divorced, have a more personal ‘sinful secret’ or even because they never went to church often enough).

To orchestrate a ‘good death’ despite these ambivalences, the doctor or a close family member with connections might suggest that a priest or pastor be found who is expected to understand and address any alienation from the church and the fear of being judged that the dying person (and his or her family) might feel. Usually, this means that it will be a progressive Catholic priest or pastor, who is more liable to adapt to the specific circumstances of this death and the sensitivities of the people around it. However, parish priests often resent being sidelined by a priest from elsewhere, and they might make things difficult for this strange priest in the organization of the funeral mass in ‘his’ parish church.

To the family it might be more painful to be confronted with the arrangements required when the person dying has not given any thought to the last rituals, as when he or she might be suffering from Alzheimer’s or is otherwise not capable to decide things. In these cases, it will depend on the younger generation whether ‘something’ will be done that gives the passing away and burial a Catholic flavour. If the bereft are indifferent to Catholicism or even hostile, they will suppress any vague indication that the dying or dead person might want a priest or pastor to do ‘something’.

In yet other cases, the dying person is clear about the wish to receive the sacraments of the sick, and to have a Catholic funeral. The local parish priest will be called, and a date will be set to administer the sacraments of the sick, so that other family members might also be present. But even then, when a priest seems indifferent, authoritative or uncooperative, things might become complicated, feelings get easily hurt and moral outrage (especially among those of the post-war generation) is easily triggered.

More and more, the family and friends of the dying or deceased person want to be involved in orchestrating the rituals. As Wouters signals ‘they [the bereft] take full responsibility for their performance; it is not, and certainly not unquestionably, delegated to authorities like priests’ (Wouters 2002:3). This was clearly echoed in the narratives around dying. However, this attitude runs counter to the position of the neo-conservatives, which states that the focus of the last rites is not the expression of grief, a celebration of life or the commemoration of the deceased, but the proper execution of certain sacred acts that will safely conduct the soul of the deceased from this world to the next.
This means that a neo-conservative priest will try to constrain the tendency of the bereft to express their emotions and their memories of the dead or dying person during the rituals, on the prayer cards, through the choice of music and prayers. Traditionally, the family would defer to the authority of the priest and the undertaker to take care of these things, but the rituals are taken over by the family and friends to express what this person and his or her dying mean to them.

In these narratives, the arrangement of the ritual moments around death was described in terms of a series of morally charged issues for ‘haggling’: the bereft wanted to use the space for text on the commemorating card to remember the character and uniqueness of the deceased, while the priest thought it should have an appropriately religious prayer. The bereft wanted to speak during the funeral service, while the priest resisted intrusion into the sacred space of the mass. The priest refused their choice of music, forbade that: the family friend who also happens to be a priest did the mass for the funeral, or usurped the money collected for the deceased’s favourite charity during the mass on the grounds that it was collected in his church. These and other stories were told to illustrate two things: first, how meaningful the dying process had been. And second, to bolster: the stereotype of the anti-social, uncaring and callous neo-conservative ‘young’ priests.

Older and neo-conservative priests sometimes complained: why is a ‘normal’ traditional funeral not good enough anymore? Why do people want to ‘plan’ their deaths? When did death become such a terrible tragedy that everybody has to show and share their grief? Like the undertakers I spoke to, they signalled a great urge to ‘personalize’ the ritual, to make it express something about the deceased and what he or she had meant to those who are left behind. And they recognized that they had to tread very carefully in the emotional minefield surrounding death and burial.

The emancipation of the familiar

The two undertakers I interviewed, both women, said that they were also becoming more and more aware of the need for families to give the funeral a ‘different’ touch, using symbols and creating rituals that resonate with the private universe of meaning shared within the family of which the deceased used to be a part. They were diversifying their services to meet his need. They emphasized that they saw it as a part of their jobs not only to provide practical support, but also to provide emotional support, which mainly translated into ‘giving space’ to people’s emotions and supporting their efforts to make the funeral into a meaningful event. However, for the people of the rural communities of Limburg, the undertakers said this rarely took a form that was very far removed from the traditional Catholic format.

So there seems to be a tendency to make the funeral into something personal, or more accurately, into something familiar: the considerations of the family and community around the dying persons take precedence over the church’s protocols for the proper execution of the last rites. Although the family and community also value a proper execution, they feel that the role of the priest should be at the service of the event
they are shaping. I: is assumed that nobody outside the circle of family and friends can understand their grief, understand the importance this person had to people. Anybody who presumes to impose meanings on the event that are alien to the life world of the family and friends can count on resistance, passive or active. Paradoxically, the traditional Catholic format is part of this familiar universe of meanings, whereas the person of the priest is usually not, except when he is a family friend. Therefore, the priest’s role is that of an actor in the drama orchestrated by the family and friends, and as soon as he wants to do something that goes against the wishes of the family, he will discover that he is not the director.

If these narratives and the trends signalled by the priests and undertakers are to be believed, there might be a process of the ‘emancipation of the familiar’ underway. In this process, the familiar practices of signification clash with ‘unfamiliar’ practices, such as the neoconservative discourse of some priests or the cold economic practices of a crematorium. In his clash, the representatives of ‘the familiar’ use ‘emotional’ arguments and stereotyping to defend their interests, rather than ‘moral’ or religious arguments that can be fitted into a particular discourse.

This could be related to the trends signalled by Post et al. in the Netherlands and other Western European countries: more and more, rituals are created after a disaster that has caught the public attention. In these rituals, they discern the beginnings of a civil religion, where a connection to the fate of the victims and empathy is expressed in a way that give people the feeling they are part of a larger whole (Post, Nugteren et al. 2002:246). It is important to note that the development to turn the last rites into something familiar was always sketched against a background of the indifference of the unfamiliar, the anonymity of modern life. This is one reason why constraints on expression are criticized in such a morally charged way. It is a sin against the message that the bereft wan: to emphasize: ‘we care that this person died. This is a significant event for us. Our familiar world has been transformed by this event. We have to do everything in our power to show how much we care’.

Connection and love, the celebration of the familiar, are becoming the central values in the rituals around dying. The undertakers and the priests I spoke to, as well as the participants in a course on wakes28 of the pastoral centre I attended, also alluded to this spectre of indifference, that seems to originate from the images of alienation and loneliness associated with the old mining towns. Except for the neoconservative priest, they all encouraged expressions of familiarity with the deceased in the obituary, in the prayer cards, in the choice of bible-texts to be read and songs to be sung. In short, anything to reinforce the message that people had cared for this person,

28 These courses were offered to parish volunteers from all over the region who were part of local ‘wake groups’. These groups organise wakes when someone from the local community has died (with the permission of the direct family of course).
that this was not an anonymous death. Using impersonal, traditional or ‘rational’
modern formats was considered cold and uncaring.

According to the undertakers I spoke to, the number of ‘anonymous’ funerals of
those who die lonely and old, their children having moved away, is still on the rise,
especially for those who live in the old mining towns around the area of my research.29
Especially cremations and burials at ‘general’ (non religious) funeral houses were
perceived as ‘cold’, anonymous, ‘industrial’, an act so stripped of any significance that it
is jarring and feels dehumanizing. Against this background of frightening anonymity
and rationality, the active participation of the family and close friends in the last rites
becomes a statement about the meaningfulness of the life of the dying person, and a
comfort to the spouse who stays behind. In some narratives, the arrangements around
the last rites were represented as a process that knitted networks of mutual support
closer together and led to a religious re-signification of traditional ritual formats.

It is this need to express and the elaboration of grief that neo-conservative
priests react against by tightening their rules, following the instructions given by the
diocese. Rather than taking the psychological dynamics of the moment as a point of
departure, like the progressive priests of the pastoral centre do, they take the
timelessness of the sacraments as an unbending given and their main frame of reference.
Nevertheless, the neo-conservative priest I spoke to had also learned to avoid trouble:
when a young girl died and her parents wanted a Catholic funeral, he suggested a
prayer service rather than a mass to avoid the issue of having to refuse the sacraments to
all her young classmates who might be living sinful lives. In the following sections I
show how the issue of the sacraments is important even to the laxest of Catholics.

The power of disapproval and the mechanism of the sacraments

Although the haggling over the space for expression was often felt as unpleasant and led
to disapproving conclusions about the character of a particular priest, it came nowhere
near the moral outrage caused by a priest who would invoke the mechanism of the
sacraments to exclude people or inspire fear that the deceased might be excluded from
heaven.

As indicated by the stories of undertakers, priests and the person of the
humanist association, we might understand the need for expressing how much they

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29 In rare cases, the humanist association (traditionally the ‘enemies’ of Catholics) might be called
in to do something more than watch the casket sink into the ground and drink coffee afterwards.
But according to their local spokesperson, it had never happened that they were called by
someone from one of the rural communities, even though their phone number is available
everywhere, in the same places as the phone number of the local parish priest and the
undertaker.

30 Indeed, another set of stories was about crematoria sending a huge bill after the cremation
because the family stayed five minutes longer in the reception room.
cared for this person as a reaction against the alienation characterising modern society, the feeling of ‘homelessness’ described by Berger at al cited in chapter 1. But this background does not adequately account for the indignation voiced by people when they talked about a priest who had miss-stepped in some way. Even when it did not directly concern the sacraments priests were judged more harshly and in more personal terms than for example undertakers, doctors or nurses who might also be closely involved in the emotional turmoil of death. We already saw that limiting the space for participation and expression of the family and friends during the rituals can be felt as an insult to the familiar expression of care and grief. However, a priest not granting a request, not being attentive and understanding enough is painted in vivid colours as a villain, a psychopath even, but an undertaker doing the same is just a grey phantom with no personality, only thinking of the bills getting paid. A doctor or nurse around making a callous remark did not even generate stories. Why, we might wonder, is this so?

In so far as they can be assumed to be traditional Catholics, the refusal of one of the sacraments (sacrament of the sick, funeral mass, burial in hallowed ground) means the ultimate disaster to people of the older generation. They would be indignant and hurt if a priest delayed his visit when called, or forgot to come by when he ‘could have known’ someone was mortally ill. These anecdotes centred on a tension between old and new moral orientations. In the ‘traditional’ frame of reference these omissions of the priests could be interpreted as judgement on them as a morally decent person. But in present-day value orientations his behaviour is reflected back unto himself: he should know to avoid giving this impression and thereby causing people pain. He should wield his ‘power of disapproval’ carefully.

Not only the pre-war generation, but also the post-war generation was sensitive to the power of disapproval associated with priests. And they were more inclined to conclude that any omission or carelessness reflected badly on the priest; it did not really inspire any guilt feelings in them. But a priest using the mechanism of the sacraments disqualified himself irrevocably in the eyes of the younger generation.

During the course on wakes, this was discussed extensively during one of the sessions and it often returned in the other courses and in interviews. One of the narratives about ‘bad priests’ centred around a priest who had carefully outlined, during a funeral mass for someone who had died young, the state in which one is fit to receive the sacrament of the communion. This would exclude all those who were either divorced, homosexual, having sex without being married etc. This story generated a lot of indignation among the other participants: ‘he is way behind! Who the hell does he think he is! How insensitive can you be?!’

Why, when people do not even go to church anymore and ignore the church’s moral guidelines, when potential clashes in values are usually successfully downplayed

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31 See chapter 6
within family relationships, why do they clash around this issue? Based on an understanding of the historical and religious context presented in the previous chapters, we might understand this in the following way:

Still within living memory, the church wielded a lot of moral power, and the mechanism of the sacraments was a key instrument in enforcing the moral order envisaged by the church. Over the past decades, the moral disapproval of the church has ceased to matter, its power confined to the ritual space of mass. In Welden, the church has been ceded as the territory of the priest. But at the moment of someone’s death, the church is not the territory of the priest anymore but that of the family and friends of the deceased. The Catholic rituals are part of the familiar domain encompassing family and community. A priest has the role of executing the familiar Catholic formats. If he does anything that goes beyond executing these formats and does not give voice to what the bereft feel and hooe, they feel that the ritual expression of their caring and grief is hijacked as a platform for a moral agenda they do not agree with. The last rites are considered familiar territory where the moral authority of outsiders can only be validated if they are supported by the moral emotional life of the insiders.

When a priest invokes the power of disapproval of the church in this context, it would seem that what the church disapproves of and the people gathered in the church and even the deceased disapprove of are the same thing, since it is ‘their’ funeral. But he is presuming too much, especially when the priest outlines the guidelines of the church and concludes that those living in contradiction to these guidelines should not take communion. This disapproval is not legitimate in the eyes of the post-war generation: it is their funeral, and they never intended that an entire generation of young people should be excluded from the communion. Because this would be the effect of a strict adherence to the guidelines of the church: not only divorcees and homosexuals would be excluded, but any unmarried person with some sexual experience. Which would be most friends in the case of someone who died young.

Furthermore, the priest presumes to do this with the authority of the pope, Jesus Christ (represented in the communion) and God behind him. Only the staunchest atheists would be insensitive to the insult, let alone a group of people who consider themselves (although vaguely) Catholic. To paraphrase: ‘who the hell does he think he is, playing the gatekeeper of heaven?’ Although at other moments people might not care at all that this particular priest thinks that certain groups of people are not fit to receive the sacraments, during a funeral rite the women who would tell these stories feel it was unacceptable. It goes against the feeling of communio that they wish to create at such a moment, which usually means a de-emphasizing of hierarchy, a breaking down of the usual boundaries between people (see also Wouters 2002).

This puts the priest who feels he must enforce the church guidelines in a lonely and defensive position, which is sometimes even perceived as pathologically anti-social. In fact, as I mentioned already, furious critics sometimes described priests who explicitly refused the sacraments as psychopaths.
This does not mean that the same women who get angry with a priest for excluding people from the communion necessarily want the church to change its doctrine, or rather, it does not occur to them to attempt to take any initiative to do this. Normally, it does not matter to them, because they do not go to church very often anyway, and it does not prevent them from living a life according to their own light. They ‘belong without believing’\textsuperscript{22}. They just do not want their parents (in the case of the last communion being refused, or the question of whether or not the deceased can be buried in hallowed ground) or their children (in the case of taking the communion during funeral mass) to be hurt by someone imposing standards completely alien to their life world, however much value they place on tradition.

Refusing the sacraments

Of course, this makes one curious: how often does it actually happen that a priest refuses the sacraments? There must be many occasions where, according to the church, a dying person has sinned and dies without repenting because to him (or her) there is nothing to repent. For all except the most liberal of the priests I spoke to, this was a difficult and touchy subject. It was therefore also difficult to interview them about it. They way they told it, they avoided situations where they actively had to refuse (they all saw active euthanasia as such an occasion, and to the neo-conservatives being divorced might also be a reason) as much as possible. Their solutions to avoid this kind of conflict were very creative.

The most explicitly neo-conservative priest I spoke to said that he never actually refused. According to others, he had refused on some occasions, and also asked whether the dying person was planning to commit euthanasia. But according to himself, he always avoided to know if there was euthanasia involved. He assumed that the people who called him to give the sacraments of the sick and conduct the funeral mass knew what church does and does not condone. He trusted them not to call him in cases where the dying person would not be fit to receive the sacraments, or would know what facts to hold back so that he would not be put in a position where he had to refuse.

I was bewildered by the logic of this argument; if he was being true to his faith and his calling should he not be sure he was not administering the sacraments to someone ‘unworthy’? His explanation of this contradiction was that since Vatican II, Catholic doctrine specifies that a priest cannot come between an individual’s conscience and God. So if the individual involved thinks he has made his peace with God and is fit to receive the sacraments, he should not question that. But if he knows of any transgressions, he is forced to implement the guidelines of the church and refuse the sacraments. That is why, in the case of a young person’s funeral where a lot of young

\textsuperscript{22} This refers to the title of Grace Davie’s book ‘Believing without Belonging’ (Davie 1994). In an article she mentions that in the Scandinavian countries, this expression was turned around by many scholars, into ‘belonging without believing’(Davie n.d.). This also sums up the attitude of many Catholics in the Netherlands and in Limburg.
people could be expected to participate, he did not celebrate a mass, as the parents first requested, but proposed to develop another kind of service.

Another priest told me that he had once been confronted with a case of active euthanasia. He had been supporting a woman throughout her illness with pastoral care, but when she announced that she wanted to commit euthanasia he withdrew. When I asked him if she was buried in hallowed ground or not, he at first refused to answer, then said she was buried at a ‘general’ (algemene) cemetery, where all the ground has been hallowed.

The most liberal priest I interviewed drew the line at administering the sacraments of the sick after someone had died, something that the family apparently requests quite often because all the priests I spoke to mentioned it. Instead, he would propose to pray together for the soul of the deceased to be taken into God’s care. In this way, he addressed the family’s anxiety that their beloved could not get into heaven, because he did not receive the last sacraments.

We might conclude that even though it probably does not happen very often, the fear that the sacraments might be refused generates a lot of moralizing and position taking, where neo-conservative priests fulfil the role of ‘bad guy’, in contrast to the ‘good and sensible’ moral consensus of ‘normal people’ who simply want to express their grief and show that they care without presuming to exclude other grieving persons.

Despite secularization then, Catholic practices can still be quite important to people, and not only to the older generation, because they are rooted within the familiar. The sacraments and the rites associated with them are the most tangible aspects of Catholicism and they have remained important markers despite the out-flux from the churches of the sixties and seventies. Moreover, certain Catholic concepts associated with the mechanism of the sacraments resonate with deeply held fears and anxieties of the mechanism can inspire (of being branded as sinful, denied entrance to heaven etc.), but therefore also with hopes and longing. These hopes and longings might not be articulated as clearly anymore as they used to be, when paradise and heaven were thought of as places, and a ‘dirty’ conscience was visualized as a soul with ugly black spots. But they are embedded within the moral emotional life and thus form part of the attitudes with which people approach religious repertoires, as will become clear in the next two chapters. However, since the time when children were taught that heaven is a place where they might be denied entrance and they had to keep their souls spotless, ways of life have changed radically, and different modes of moral orientation and considerations have developed and reshaped the attitudes with which people approach familiar Catholic practices.

3. THE YOUNGER GENERATION: “DESPITE…”

Why are these Catholic practices still so important, even to those who ‘belong without believing’? Choosing not to go through Catholic life cycle rituals would be a painful slap
in the face of the community and the older generations. It would amount to a statement that what everybody considers to be the ‘normal’ routines and practices are not good enough for them; that the upbringing their parents gave them is somehow lacking. For the same reason, not sending your child to the local Catholic school would be a significant statement that would create a distance between a family and the local community. Like the local schools, the traditional Catholic life cycle rituals are part of the domain of the familiar, and derive their significance from this fact.

Even so, it is becoming more and more acceptable that parents do not have their children baptized or participate in the First Holy Communion ritual, especially in communities where the relationship between the community and the parish priest is strained, or where there are a lot of people from ‘outside’ who are not worried about snubbing the local ways. The justification then is that children should make their own choice what to believe when they grow older. However, the majority of parents in the south of Limburg still have their children baptized and let them do the Holy Communion, even when they are not active Catholics themselves (Schepens 2001:24).

Local schools take care not to discriminate against non-Catholic children, especially with regard to the First Holy Communion, but parents fear that their children would be ostracized if they don’t celebrate the First Holy Communion like all the other kids in their class. Social pressure is still involved, although not to the extent of formal exclusion if a child does not participate. But social pressure is not the only reason for going through the life cycle rituals.

In the last chapter, the pre-war generation was cited as saying about their children: ‘they have their own faith’, without discussing it further. Whatever this faith might be, it was far removed from the wholly Catholic world they themselves grew up in; and therefore did not fit into their own narratives. But they also emphasized: ‘still, they decided to have their child baptized’, or ‘still, they go to church with their children every once in a while’. Sometimes, in some cases, young parents decide to have their child baptized despite not having married before the church.

According to these older people, their children explained this in variations on the following statement: ‘that’s how we grew up, so I want to give that to my children too. Not in the way it was in my parents’ time, but still, it’s important to have some basis. When they [the children] grow up, they will make up their own mind’. This is also what the younger people would tell me in the interviews and informal conversations.

Another often heard remark was: ‘I experience my faith in my own way, I don’t need the priest to tell me what to believe’. Implicit in these statements is the belief that everybody should be left to their own best judgements in matters of faith. However, as priests sometimes remarked bitterly, these people do go to the priest and the church for
the life cycle rituals: baptism, Holy Communion, marriage, the last Sacraments and funerary rites.

When new parents of the younger generation decided that their own children should in turn acquire the emblems of Catholicism, it seemed to signal to their parents the sameness of life despite all the differences between the generations. At least, that is how the older generation interpreted it: even though their children live in a time with more luxury, where ‘everybody has all the modern comforts and knows it all’84, they do not want to ‘break with the kind of life their parents lived, they are not burning their bridges to the past. Their life remains rooted in the familiar and is governed by the predictable logic of certain life patterns, the rules and responsibilities of interpersonal relationships in this domain.

This also became clear in the interviews and informal conversations with parents of the generation born in the late fifties and sixties: their intention was not to go against their parents, to break with them, or to have a revolutionary new lifestyle. Of course, they want to do things ‘better’, mainly in the freedom and sense of personal responsibility they grant their children, but this does not mean that they explicitly react against their parents. The older generation is reassured: when it comes down to the ‘basics’ of life, settling down and especially raising children, their children choose to reconnect with tradition, even if it is mostly ‘symbolic’, to pay their respects to the way their parents lived. That is why the older generation sees the younger generation as having basically the same kind of life as they had: working hard and raising children.

All in all, the meaning of the emblems of Catholicism like baptism, Holy Communion and sending your children to a Catholic school has changed considerably. From being the signposts of a ‘good Catholic life’ no person can avoid passing, they have become emblems of identity, of belonging to the local community. To many people, these rituals do not have any religious significance anymore. At the same time, because of their religious roots and their significance in local life, these emblems are coveted entrance points for progressive and neo-conservative Catholics to teach their versions of Catholicism (See also Lukken 2001:558-564; Post 2001:598). This, in turn, can lead to a process of religious re-signification or sacralization. This will be described in section 5 and further elaborated in chapter 6. First, I will describe how processes of modernization have reshaped local community life and the place of the church in it.

4. TANGIBLE PROGRESS

Considering the previous description where religious rituals still play a role but their religious significance has drained away, the question is how life in the local communities has changed, what ‘other’ moral discourses and horizons have emerged

84 See the citation of the lady commenting on the decline of community in section 5 of the previous chapter
and how this has affected the moral and religious authority of the local representative of the Catholic Church, the priest. In chapter 2, I reviewed the changes in discourse that took place within the Catholic pillar since the later years of the fifties. These changes in discourse filtered down selectively through the pillarized organizations and through the efforts of individual priests, such as the priest who preceded the conservative priest in Welden, described in chapter 3. Here, I will take a closer look at the way general social changes reshaped community life in the south of Limburg.

After WWII, the Dutch economy recovered and prospered, and in the sixties a higher standard of living seemed within reach for everybody. The welfare state expanded and professionalized, and took over the tasks that were traditionally carried out by the pillarized organizations while the pillarized organizations themselves secularized (Linde 2001:529; Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981). The sharp divisions between ‘standen’ (status-groups) disappeared as the general educational level rose among the younger generations. Most people are now employed in the service sector rather than in the agrarian sector or in the mines (Kamp, Derks et al. 2001). Mass media introduced a whole new cultural dynamic, and provided access to a wide array of opinions and lifestyles.

These societal changes had a generally ‘disembedding’ impact, loosening associations between employers and local communities and widening local horizons and making it possible to live in a village without participating in these local horizons (Wijnands 1998). People became more mobile: the roads improved, means of transport became faster, more and more people had a car. Access to a wider range of information and more leisure time led to new initiatives and organizations such as the very active cycling clubs racing around the hills of Limburg during the weekends. The general level of education improved, the son of the farmer can now become a professor.

However, locally shared horizons did not completely disappear or fragment, on the contrary. Local communities in Limburg are characterized by a high degree of organization: the local dove-keepers association, the association for the elderly, the Rural Catholic Women’s organization, the Red Cross, the choir, the brass band, the ‘homeguard’ association (schutterij) the association for local history, etc. These organizations were and to some extent still are, connected to the parish church and the (remnants of) the Catholic pillar (Wijnands 1998).

In Chapter 2 I described how the position of Catholic organizations moved from one where ‘information’ was dosed and controlled in such a way as to limit people’s opportunities to deviate from the straight and narrow as defined by the church, to a position where ‘information’ and education was seen as a means to emancipate people by the government, school and the formerly pillarized organizations. Starting in the sixties, progress and modernization became the key words of the organizations and institutions of the Catholic pillar shaping local life. Even when Gijzen decided it was time to ‘turn back the clock’, for the most part he did not manage to re-establish control over the pillarizec organizations to follow his agenda (Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981).
This meant that new ‘scientific’ insights continued to be rapidly popularized and distributed through the many Catholic farmer and women’s organizations and through the school curricula. Farming methods were modernized in step with changes in the rest of the Netherlands and schools, including Catholic schools, were all brought under the same national regime in 1968. A state university was set up in Maastricht in 1976.

The expansion of the welfare state and the general economic prosperity provided new job opportunities. New and better housing added to the old historical centres provided living space for the emancipating working class and the expanding class of white-collar workers. Whereas before, women had to stop working as soon as they got married, or in the agrarian sector worked alongside their husbands, they could now find work outside the domestic sphere. And after the 1950s, the number of children per family dropped drastically, in Limburg more than in any other province (Knippenberg 1992:182).

Not only was there an increase in the ‘information’ and technology becoming available, many new ideas and moral orientations rippled from the urban centres to lap at the edges of the village communities. In the name of progress, liberation and ‘de verbeelding aan de macht’ (power to the imagination, the battle-cry of the flower power generation), the solid society that the older generation had tried to rebuild after WWII was taking harsh criticism (Kennedy 1995b). In the urban centres, radical new ways of living were experimented with, and the traditional biography and family structures became one option among many (Kennedy 1995b; Kooistra and Mourik 1997).

Although the experimenting largely bypassed rural areas, the results of this experimenting eventually became mainstream and took hold there as well. Notions of equality between men and women, of equality between all peoples and nations of the world, and world peace, were translated in a less radical and experimental way via progressive Catholicism and shaped the practices of the formerly pillarized institutions. Insights from the social sciences and psychology became widespread via new approaches to mental health and social work, as well as in education. Fashion and popular culture inspired new ideas about sexuality, gender and the body to such an extent that most young adults nowadays would have trouble defining the word ‘chastity’.

As we saw in the previous chapter, especially when the implementation of these new ideas regarding the status of priests and sexuality entailed a break in established routines and relationships between people and status groups, they caused controversy. But once new routines and formats for interaction were developed, the resistance to going back to ‘the old ways’, as Gijsen wanted, was strong, especially on the part of the post-war generation.

Even feminism made its way into the local community. One of my first informants told me how this came about. She used to be the chairwoman of the local chapter of the Limburg Rural Women’s Association (a Catholic organization, and mainly
meant for agrarian women). During the seventies, this association was given subsidies to conduct courses for female empowerment. She was sceptical about these courses. For example, during the meetings they would have to clap for each other when one woman reported that she did not do any household chores for one whole weekend. But, she commented, of course that woman had to clean up the mess herself after the weekend. She joked that they should have thought of organizing men’s empowerment courses as well, so they could help each other learn to organize the household. According to her, feminism would have been more of a success if they had thought of that.

In her opinion, the teacher was too radical in encouraging women to be ‘emancipated’, and four marriages broke up as a result. All in all, she saw feminism as something that made women act crazily, and left men bewildered because they did not have a clue what they had done wrong. Nevertheless, as she mentioned at the outset of this conversation, she applauded the fruits of feminism: women are no longer fired as soon as they marry. Although she ‘never noticed’ she was supposed to be subservient to her husband, she approved of these changes⁷.

She also commented on the changing composition of the local community since the fifties: there are many newcomers. These newcomers are often not interested in joining community life in the form of one of the many village associations or when they do participate, they can usually not be counted on to do the necessary volunteer work. However, neither do they significantly disrupt community life.

The villages of rural Limburg have become the suburbs for the cities of Heerlen, Sittard and Maastricht. Urban professionals, artists, and well-off pensioners increasingly populate the formerly agrarian hamlets, villages and towns. These villages provide them with an idyllic environment, but, as my informant indicated, their ties with the local community are usually not so strong. The real estate prices have gone up accordingly, which makes it difficult for the children of the locals to buy a house in the community they grew up in (Wijnands 1998:14-26).

Another effect of the influx of ‘imported’ people is that it becomes more and more possible to remain anonymous even in small communities. This in turn means that it becomes possible that new ideas are less and less mediated ‘within’ the local community, but be present and accepted in the anonymous shell ‘around’ it. ‘The local community’ (‘de gemeenschap’ or ‘de gemeenskap’ in dialect) is becoming just one segment of a population accidentally sharing the same geographical location. In combination with the rising real-estate prices, this development gives the label of Catholicism a new salience as a marker of the ‘familiar’ versus the ‘unfamiliar’.

The consequences of the ‘tangible progress’ of Dutch society in terms of values can be illustrated by looking at a study published in 1978. This study analyzes the

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⁷ (See chapter 8 in Dijk, Huijts et al. 1990 for an account of a trainer working on similar projects in the province of Brabant).
changes in the way a popular women’s weekly magazine (Margriet) with a Catholic background, replied to women’s queries for advice (Brinkgreve 1978:93-94). Summarizing the developments in themes and moral orientation, Brinkgreve writes:

‘The problems, and especially the advice given, point to a lessening of differences in power between socio-economic classes, between men and women and between parents and children. More emotions are allowed expression, and a wider range of behaviours is thought acceptable. Men are expected to be more considerate towards women, and in different ways. With regard to certain themes, Margriet changed from rejection to acceptance: voluntary childlessness, cohabitation, homosexuality, a generous standard of living. Instead of rules for behaviour, psychological advice and interpretations are offered, along with the address for the organization that one might turn to for help with a particular problem. The power to decide and responsibility to act are located within the individual. More and more often, people get the advice not to concern themselves too much with the opinion of other people: clearly, a process of individualization is going on’. (Brinkgreve 1978:93-94 my translation).

This aptly summarizes the changes in the general value orientation and outlook replicated within the particular local horizons that were the subject of chapter 3 and this chapter so far. In the narratives around the last rites, we saw that these values define the attitudes with which people approach the rituals (‘emotions should be allowed expression’) the role of the priest (‘lessening of difference in power’) and the mechanism of the sacraments (‘a wider range of behaviours is thought acceptable’).

The magazine Brinkgreve discusses had lower class and lower middle class Catholic women as its main reading public. During my youth, this was the magazine most often found in people’s homes in the rural communities of Limburg. Although the audience of this magazine could hardly be described as being in the forefront of cultural change in the Netherlands, they were clearly not resisting it either. Magazines like this provided down to earth and practical guidance in a society that, in terms of material wealth, seemed to get better and better all the time.

Although the division of tasks between men and women is not so strictly defined now, in practice there are clear gender roles: women more often take care of the children, cooking and cleaning, the sick within the extended family, and the ties within the local community. They send the Christmas cards, wrap the gifts, remember birthdays and organize parties, bake pies for fundraising for local associations and do all the necessary volunteer work in the old people’s home, the local library and the local Red Cross. A good Limburg woman is a very busy person, and has her housespanking clean. Men have the fulltime job or the deserved pension, take care of finances, collect money in the parish church, dig in the garden, take care of the heavy work in the graveyard. A good Limburg man cares for his family by bringing in money and having all the repairs around the house in order. A very good Limburg man might also be able
to cook and serve coffee to visitors, like the husband of the lady who told me her experience with feminism.

Walking around Welden on a weekday you will see women washing windows, taking their children to and from school (schools close for lunch), an old lady with a large bag entering the church by a side door to clean, tourists sitting on an esplanade, old men sitting on a bench like over-age teenagers commenting on the passers-by, and the real teenagers hanging around the bus station loudly teasing each other and luging book bags too big for them. Family life, the raising of children is the main business in a place like this.

In this solid, affluent life, moral guidance by the church often seems superfluous. If problems do arise (drugs, unwanted pregnancy, rebellious children) people do not turn to the priest for help and the priest does not take it upon himself to monitor these problems. Rather, they call in the help of the appropriate experts and support groups: psychologist, doctor, social worker, patient associations, groups for mourning etc. Nevertheless, as we saw, Catholic religious concepts and practices are still important anc mark important moments in life. And as I will show in the next section, the local church is also still important to the continuity of community life and the local sense of identity.

The church in community life

As with the impact of feminism taken as an example above, the general, almost universally agreed on sketch of secularization should be nuanced with regard to the local horizons described here. The church did lose a lot of power, but in local community life, priests and chaplains often continued to exercise their influence even during the years that the churches emptied and afterwards. In some cases, priest and local community have been ‘together’ for so many years that they are quite organically entangled. This influence is becoming more and more informal, and thus dependent on the personality and social skills of the priest or chaplain involved. Even where a priest is still guaranteed a place on the board of local communities, the generally higher level of education of the lay members staffing these boards alters his authority.

Traditionally, the priest was automatically considered to be the most ‘learned’, perhaps next to the school principal and the doctor, but with a special aura because of his calling, the power of the institution of the church he represented, and his frightening celibacy which set him apart from ‘normal’ people. When this celibacy came into question, as we saw in the previous chapter, the authority of the priest and the whole church suddenly seemed to founder. Nowadays, his position is less ‘exalted’ and most people seem to think it would be better for the poor man to marry, not only for his personal psychological health but also because he would be in a better position to advise people, having more experience with the complications of family life.

As a result of the rise of the secular welfare state and in some cases – as in Welden- augmented by the polarization within the diocese of Roermond, territories
were carved up between ‘professionals’ (health, education, etc.) and the church from the national down to the local level. The church became a bounded entity instead of all pervasive. Already existing social spheres like school and the workplace became independent from the influence of the church and newly emerging spheres remained outside the scope of the parish priest’s influence. Whereas before, every local organization and institution had a ‘spiritual advisor’ on its board, it became less and less a matter of course that the parish priest would be invited on the board, although in practice this is often still the case.

Furthermore, when church attendance was framed as something that should be internally motivated rather than externally enforced, the weekly rhythms of community life became less steady and less bound to the church; younger people go ‘when they feel like it’. Even for those who had been accustomed to go to church all their lives, the rhythm changed. For example, many older people now prefer to go to church to celebrate the Eucharist on Saturday night rather than Sunday morning, since it is not obligatory to have fasted anymore.

However, the yearly rhythm of feasts and commemorations, and the celebration of the important holidays celebrated in the local associations and the local schools remain linked to the church. The various village associations all like to have their special Christmas and Easter celebrations done by the parish priest, but often his involvement with these associations goes no further than this. Lately, these Easter and Christmas celebrations are under pressure because of the shortage of priests. Although the local village associations protest loudly against it, these special celebrations are now being integrated with the Easter and Christmas mass celebrated for the general parish.

Parish life is no longer identical to community life. Unlike before, if you do not go to church, you can still be a decent person and an active community member. Furthermore, in terms of specifically religious content, the monopoly of the church is broken by new alternatives, such as locally organized spiritualist groups and later, the spread of New Age repertoires, described in section 6.

Nevertheless, the label ‘Catholic’ is still important to signal continuity and rootedness in local practices. This is clear in the history of the local elementary schools: when Gijzen threatened to take away their ‘Catholic’ label because they did not comply with his standards, they protested loudly. And he did not succeed: most, if not all local elementary schools in the small rural communities of the South of Limburg are at least nominally Catholic.

They all struggle to formulate what this means nowadays: there are no more nuns and friars teaching, the content of most lessons has no connection to a traditionally Catholic worldview, and many parents are as ignorant about Catholicism as their children (and as the younger teachers). The present-day senior teachers came of age at the time when the critique of lay Catholic professionals of the ‘stuffiness’ of the enclosed Catholic world, the deadness of rituals, and authoritarian relations within the Catholic
church were well cut into the open, from the local level of the parish and diocese to the
global level of the world church.

These teachers tend to emphasize the values of open-mindedness, inclusiveness
and equality, summarized as ‘progressiveness’. This is contrasted with the enclosed,
restrictive and authoritative Catholicism dominating schools in the past, with separate
education for boys and girls. They see the doctrines expressed by the diocese, especially
when Gijzen was still the bishop, as hopelessly and infuriatingly obsolete and irrelevant.
As one teacher expressed it: ‘if a priest would ask me about my sex life, I would say, “it’s
fine, but what about yours? Isn’t that a little bit more problematic?”’. In this kind of
rhetoric, they express that as far as they are concerned, priests have to step carefully in
moral matters and respect people’s own good sense in conducting their work and their
lives. They should expect to be answered back, rather than obeyed without question.

Nevertheless, the local elementary schools do find it important to continue
identifying themselves as Catholic. ‘Belonging’ to the local community and being a
Catholic are still entwined, the former implying the latter.

According to the elementary school teachers I met during my fieldwork, losing
the label ‘RK’ (Roman Catholic) would have caused parents to look askance at them⁶⁸.
Schools without this label are seen as ‘strangers’, elements that don’t belong naturally in
the village community. ‘RK’ is connected to being a ‘Limburger’ and sending your child
to a ‘different’ school would be equivalent to denying your roots, making a choice
against the community by entrusting the education of your child to outsiders. A choice
like that would need a strong defence.

Being a ‘Catholic’ school, according to the local elementary school teachers (in
Welden and other places), does not mean that they teach a certain version of how the
world came into being, or how you should live. In their words, it means that they
encourage children to reflect on ‘the meaning of life’, and to reflect on their behaviour
towards others. It is a very inclusive kind of Christianity, with the emphasis on a notion
of God as ‘love’ and the central message of Jesus as ‘love thy neighbour’⁶⁹. In classes on
religion they often use a general ‘Christian’ teaching method, which may even have a
protestant background. Some schools set up special groups to develop the celebrations
for Christmas and Easter, in some cases in cooperation with the parish church, in other

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⁶⁸ Except of course, when the local priest is involved, like the one cited. Although the distrust
towards outsiders is ebbing, it is still present.

⁶⁹ In the yearly report of one local school, being part of the Catholic tradition is summarized as
‘respect for every human being and every creation. Love for fellow human beings, especially
those who need help, is the place where we meet God’. For their school, they take this to mean
that the atmosphere should be hospitable and caring, that they have celebrations where awe and
responsibility for creation are expressed, and that they participate in fundraising for charities and
in the religious classes.
cases these celebrations are held separately. Another way in which they express their Catholic identity is by participating in efforts to collect money for a good cause.

In this re-signified form, we might call this a thoroughly modernized and rationalized Catholicism, which has shaped itself so as not to clash with the natural sciences, the Enlightenment ideal of ‘thinking for yourself’, nor with other religions. The focus is on ‘reflection’ rather than ‘content’, on ‘values’ such as ‘life is worth it to be lived’ rather than specific rules. As one teacher admitted, it is hard to pinpoint the difference between a Catholic school and a protestant school, except that the first is normal and accepted in the local community, and the other is conspicuous and strange.

Again, although the religious content of the Catholicism of local schools has leaked away, this provides an entry point for re-signification by specialized religious discourses, neoconservative and liberal Catholic. But in most cases, the schools choose to link up with liberal Catholic or even liberal protestant discourses.

5. re-signification of the Catholic tradition: from secularization to sacralization

Although the significance of the life cycle rituals to the younger generation seems to lie primarily in the continuity with the past and their parents’ life, these rituals are also more and more actively re-signified in the negotiation or active cooperation of the parties involved in these rituals (school, parents, priests, doctors).

Priests, educators and active Catholics often perceived the continued performance of the life cycle rituals as ‘merely going through the motions’, and therefore unsatisfactory. The Catholic Church (both liberal and conservative factions) is actively developing resources directed at parents and children to re-signify the traditional life cycles. This is done in the form of the books being sold in the pastoral centre nearby, and in the courses it offers (further described in chapter 6). Recently, some of these courses are offered on request by the diocese, to train parish volunteers in the region.

In contrast to this need to re-signify on the part of priests, educators and active Catholics, the motivations of the participants of these courses was more often that they wanted to do ‘something’ for their local church because of its importance to the local community. Without the church there would be no anchor left to help them impart to their children a sense that there is ‘something more’ to life. They implicitly assumed that they should leave the contents of that ‘something’ in the hands of the parish priests, and cast themselves in a supporting role.

‘Doing the traditional thing’ and actively involving oneself with the parish church is becoming a conscious choice made within a larger context of perceived indifference to local community life, the church and the past. When people explain their wish to stay connected in some way to Catholicism, they often illustrate their choice by referring to the rhetorical questions other people ask: ‘Why should I get married in church? Does it mean I love my wife less if we don’t get married? I don’t believe in heaven and hell, so why should I pray for my deceased father?’ Although they grant
that these can be legitimate questions, the expression of their connection to the church is a choice against the indifference described above, affirming the value of local community united in recognition of ‘something more’ in life.

Another indicator that doing the rituals is becoming a conscious choice and not only a wish to conform is the choice of words in the way both the older generation and the younger generation talk about it: they often used the word ‘toch’. This word means ‘still’, ‘yet’, ‘although’ or ‘despite’. Despite what? This is mostly left implicit. We might fill in: despite secularization and the fact that it is easy to ignore the church, despite not going to church often, despite the difference between the life of the younger generation and the older generation, despite the fact that the church can no longer dictate how one should live.

To some, performing the rituals might be the rejection of the negative of the traditional: rejecting the notion that ‘anything goes’, that form is not important, that traditions are meant to be left behind in the name of progress. It can be a choice to ‘stay local’ and perpetuate the historical community. To others, this choice might be made in the service of modern ideals such as those of liberal Catholicism, but against the anomie of individualization: wishing the individual in his connection to family and community to be the ultimate meaningful unit, rather than just ‘the individual’.

Perhaps, what is new in this situation is not the affirmation of tradition and community, but that it is felt to be an individual choice. There is a new sense that the local community is dependent on the sum of such individual choices, rather than on the necessity of cooperation and compliance to a moral order controlled by ‘the priest and the mayor’ in order to survive.

6. SACRALIZATION AND CONSUMER CULTURE

The shift in the nature and place of religions in Western and Northern Europe has been summarized by Davie as a shift ‘from obligation to consumption’ (Davie 2005). Although this phrase does not cover all of what has been described so far, it is clear that in Limburg too, there is a shift away from obligation. At the same time, religious repertoires are becoming available through consumer culture. What then, does ‘religious consumption’ mean in terms of moral orientation? So far, the emphasis has been on the changing place of the Catholic Church within local horizons and on drawing out the change in values that accompanied depillarization. We have seen that the church is still inextricably bound up with a sense of local community, but that it is not necessarily because of its religious content that people turn to the church, and even less for moral guidance.

Indeed, the freedom to decide for oneself what to believe has become very important (see also Hervieu-Léger 1998). As one neo-conservative priest joked: ‘they say they all pray by themselves, when they are walking in the forest or something, but I don’t see any busses delivering them to the forest’. He said this because he was arguing for the continued need for people to be guided by the church in their religious life.
Ironically, this region is in fact very popular for walking, and in nice weather the local roads are often clogged with cars, so the priest’s rhetoric fell flat. Of course, these cars also contain people who are going shopping on Sundays in one of the nearby towns, but many are on their way to visit another church outside their own parish. The church of the pastoral center is one popular venue where families from around the whole region attend services on Sundays. Or they might go to one of the paranormal markets held in big convention halls or small castles.

As in the rest of the Netherlands, there is a lot of ‘free floating’ religiosity that refuses to be tied down and identified with one group, one church, one institution and often catering to health and psychological problems (Reenen 1997). What does this ‘free-floating’ religiosity or spirituality look like? Can it be characterized in terms of a religious supermarket supplying a thoroughly individualized public that does not recognize any authority outside the self? Is it in fact a religiosity that sacralizes the self and modernity, as Heelas suggests (Heelas 1996; Heelas 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005)? In this section, I will situate religious ‘consumer goods’ and services and their providers who cater to specifically ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ questions and ‘needs’.

During my research I found out that so called ‘alternative spiritualities’ have a longer history in the region of Limburg than a casual observation would suggest.

**Spiritualism and New Age**

In the form of spiritualism, alternative spirituality has a history in the South of Limburg that far predates the popularization and commoditization of alternative spiritualities since the early nineties, despite the monopoly of the Catholic Church. When New Age was popularized in the early nineties, it linked up with the spiritualist networks already existing in Limburg. Here, I want to demarcate the networks of people practicing alternative spiritualities as I came to know them in Limburg from the general cultural acceptance of ‘New Age’ repertoires in the Netherlands and to situate these networks with regard to the local horizons I described so far.

Besides the ‘spiritual association’ I participated in (described in chapter 5) there are many other ‘spiritual associations’ in the villages and cities surrounding the main research area, and countless individual practitioners associated to the tradition of spiritualism, such as magnetists, mediums, and clairvoyants. According to my informants, until the late eighties these practitioners operated ‘in the shadows’, in obscure back rooms. A favourite topic among insiders of this milieu until this day is the abuse of power that some mediums would fall into with their followers. Nowadays, mediums operate more visibly, and public interest in their practices is growing. One

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*Note that Heelas distinguishes religion from spirituality by the fact that religion recognizes an authority outside the self, while spirituality does not. I see spirituality rather as a subcategory of religion (see chapter 1 for the way I define religion). My argument here and in the next chapter concerns his descriptions of the nature of what he refers to as spirituality and New Age especially his contention that they do not refer to an authority outside the self.*
medium who became particularly famous in the nineties, Jomanda, used to tour the spiritual associations in Limburg in the late seventies and in the eighties (Knibbe and Westra 2003).

In fact, spiritualism has a long tradition in the Netherlands and in Limburg. In the nineteenth century, spiritualism was first introduced to the royal court of the Netherlands in 1858. In the 1860-ies spiritual associations were established in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Groningen and Maastricht (Sommer 2001). As in the rest of Europe, the work of Swedenborg and Mesmer and the well publicized events in the house of the Fox-sisters in the US inspired the curiosity of many prominent and intellectual people around the mid- eighteen hundreds (Sommer 2001) 89. In the year 1858 the English medium Daniel Douglas Home visited the royal court of the Netherlands. His séances, where it was said tables moved of their own accord, thingsstarted floating in the air, and ghosts materialized in the form of a small hand or head, were much discussed. In Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Maastricht (near my research area) spiritualist associations were initiated at the end of the 1860-ies and the beginning of the seventies. Among the members were doctors, high military officers, prominent Christians and some famous writers. These associations dedicated themselves to the task to determine scientifically the significance of paranormal phenomena, in order to establish certainty around the question whether life really continued after the death of the physical body. In 1888 the “brother bond” Harmonia was established, with groups all over the country. This organization, attempting to encompass the multitude of local associations, still exists today.

Until the 1950-ies, the magazine of Harmonia was full of critical articles written by the better-educated members discussing and explaining paranormal phenomena in a scientific manner. Nowadays, although “scientific” jargon and methods are still part of the discourse, the interest of the members of the local associations is mainly practical, and oriented towards firsthand experience so they can ‘see for themselves’ whether it works or not. At the time, it was an interest of the higher classes; nowadays spiritualist practices are an accepted phenomenon among many more groups in Limburg. Spiritualist associations are usually dedicated to developing the paranormal powers of their members. Those who split off from the spiritualist associations under Harmonia sometimes confine themselves to the study of spirituality and paranormal phenomena.

Of a more recent date are the shops specialising in spiritual and religious books and articles, associated with the rise of New Age spreading from the urban centres of the Netherlands (mainly Amsterdam) (Aupers and Otterloo 2000:chapters 4 and 5). There are several of these bookstores in Maastricht, Sittard, Heerlen, Geleen and Brunssum and probably there are more I do not know of. These bookstores not only cater to

89 In the Netherlands, it is usually called spiritism, like in the rest of continental Europe. Since around 1995, the official spiritist organisation Harmonia has started calling itself spiritualist, linking up with the term used in England and the US and refers to itself as a member of an international spiritualist federation (www.harmonia-nl.org).
individual interests, but also serve as nodal points in the network connecting people with an interest in alternative spirituality because of their notice boards and the lectures and other activities they organize. Through these notice boards and the mingling of the clientele of these shops, spiritualist practitioners and New Age repertoires are increasingly connected. Thus, magnetists might become reiki-masters, and mediums might become shamans.

Besides bookshops, there are other important venues where the popularity of New Age and spiritualism meet. In the case of the spiritual association where I did participant observation, the psychics and mediums who came there would often go to sell their services at a ‘paranormaalbeurzen’, the paranormal ‘markets’ that are held in big halls all over the Netherlands. These halls can usually be found just outside the city-centre and can be rented for the day, or in the case of paranormal markets, for the weekend. Practitioners can rent a table at these markets to sell their services to the people who visit. In most cases these practitioners and their clients are from the surrounding areas although some practitioners travel the whole country, following these paranormal markets. Sometimes these local practitioners have their own association, and they invite each other to fill an evening with a séance, a workshop or a lecture. Often they first discovered and developed their paranormal gifts within the context of a spiritual association and the informal networks between the people who gather there.

The practice of paranormal markets grew out of the fairs spiritual associations would organize yearly to attract new members and take away local prejudice against their practices, sometimes branded as witch-craft, backward or associated with the devil. Often, the ‘services’ offered at these fairs were free or for a very low price. Since the late 1990-ies, commercial operators started organising them on a big scale, attracting practitioners who wanted to make some extra money69. They advertise professionally along the main traffic routes of the city and the surrounding villages a few weeks in advance, with cheap posters announcing the date. Nowadays, most practitioners are careful not to give away their services for free.

Within the scene of people interested in alternative spirituality, those who emphasize the ‘paranormal’ are often looked down upon as profiting from the sensationalism of the general public. In fact, the ‘paranormal’ is the most intriguing aspect for the visitors of these markets completely unfamiliar with alternative spirituality. These markets are set up to thrill, pique curiosity and promise extraordinary ‘knowledge’ and ‘evidence’ of the paranormal: take a picture of your aura, measure your energy frequencies and find out if you have any blocks, contact your spirit guide, receive a message from your deceased grandmother!

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69 One example is the markets organized by Paraview. The young men organizing it also organize fairs for reptiles, jewelry, second hand PC’s etc. See www.paraview.nl.
Consumer culture, 'buying freedom’ and familiarising authority

Generally, books, magazines and the Internet have become an important resource for people to develop ideas about issues related to worldview. Any bookstore and major warehouse has a collection of New Age, self-help and spiritual literature but books on the numerous Christian traditions are also popular. Within my research area, the bookstore connected to the pastoral centre was very successful. The bookstore of the pastoral centre tried to avoid any affinity between the books sold there and spiritualism, with its emphasis on directly contacting the sacred. Their collection specializes mostly in Christian spirituality, although there might be crossovers with the less sensationalist, less literal forms of alternative spirituality.

However, in informal conversations with participants in the pastoral centre and in the spiritual association I noted that many subjects treated in books based on Christian spirituality are interpreted more literally than intended by the authors. One example is the popularity of angels at the time of my research, which easily crossed over from the Christian and highly metaphorical spirituality developed by the Benedictine monk Anselm Grün, to theories about ‘energies’ and ‘intelligences’ from the ‘other side’, important in spiritualism (see also Versteeg 2006:93). A more recent example is the popularity of Mary of Magdalen, even prior to Dan Brown’s huge success.

Whatever the content, in the form of objects and books, alternative spiritualities and re-packaged traditional religions are taking up an ever-growing segment of department stores and bookstores, paranormal markets have become economically viable enterprises and spiritual associations flourish. At the same time, institutional religion declines.

Here, I argue that the familiarising of religious and moral authority is an important factor in understanding the increasingly consumerist form of present-day religiosity. In commoditized form, religious ideas, practices and concepts are more easily integrated into familiar territory, because there are no strings of ‘unfamiliar’ authority attached. In this respect, ‘free floating’ religious repertoires and easily accessible lectures, workshops and paranormal markets have a definite advantage over institutionalized religions.

Moreover, objects associated with religious repertoires can be circulated within the sphere of general reciprocity of personal relationships. Sacred objects ‘charged’ with special energy make cute gifts. It is considered a thoughtful touch to give someone a stone associated with one’s birth sign, or scented candles for the home, or aromatic oils that are supposed to induce certain states of consciousness or encourage particular personality traits, little booklets with wise sayings, or sometimes a more serious book. They are part of all the little cultural performances that show that people care for each other. As these objects are exchanged more and more in the context of ties of affection between people, the associations that go along with these objects will be talked about and fitted into the personal narratives people create with and for each other. These narratives in turn form the basis for moralising.

98
Although ‘browsing in the religious supermarket’ might be passed off as ‘opportunist religiosity’, to the people I spoke to this religiosity was an important part of their lives, wherein books and the exchange of ‘meaningful’ gifts with family and friends became the sustaining ground for this religiosity and the main source for creating consistency in moral orientation, emphasizing core values.

The attractions of each kind of religiosity (or spirituality as people often prefer to call it) might be different. As critical journalists have often noted, in the case of New Age repertoires and spiritualism, the goods and services being sold often appeal to insecurities and to the eternal curiosity of people whether there is really ‘something more’ that they can see with their own eyes. They promise insight into personality, into the future, personal advice from ‘the other side’. In the case of more mainstream religious goods, such as books about Christian spirituality, history or the bible, the promises are different: access to knowledge that used to be the domain of the priest, reconnecting with Catholic heritage, inspiration during a difficult time in life, guidance on how to pass on Christian values to your children.

But in all cases, the important qualifier to ‘buying’ religious or spiritual content is that there are no strings, no obligations, attached. The storekeeper is not an authority on religious matters; the author of the book is far away and invisible. Even in the paranormal market where one buys ‘knowledge’ from an expert their authoritative pronouncements might be shrugged off. Heelas argues that alternative spiritualities should not be classified as ‘religion’ because they do not refer to a God or gods outside oneself, and therefore do not recognize any authority outside oneself (Heelas 2002). Both Heelas and Woodhead speculate that ‘spirituality’ might be replacing ‘religion’ in future, by which they mean that religious authority will become less and less important (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:149-150).

Does the ‘no strings attached’ form of consuming religion also gaining ground in Limburg indeed mean that no authority outside the self is recognized? In the contexts described in this study, the issue of religious authority was much more complicated than this. In describing the negotiations around the last rites, I have already shown that religious authority is a morally charged, sensitive issue. In the case of funerals it is explicitly contrasted with the familiar, the inter-subjective world of meanings where strangers can only have authority if they connect to this world. In the next chapters, I will further show how religious authority is discussed and ‘familiarized’ or domesticated\(^1\), especially authoritative knowledge. For now, a few general remarks are in order:

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\(^1\) See also Sered, who introduced the notion of domestication of religion through her study of elderly Jewish women who have no power within the formal organisation of their religion but use Jewish rituals, symbols and theology to safeguard the well-being of those with whom they have a relationship of care (Sered 1988)
It is exactly the promise of authoritative knowledge from outside the Self that sells, both in the case of paranormal markets and in the case of the bookstore of the pastoral centre. Things and symbols associated with the sacred are often coveted. But ‘consuming religion’ is a ‘safe’ way of approaching authoritative knowledge. In the case of ‘goods’ on the market of alternative spiritualities, rather than submitting to the authority of a priest vested with the power to withhold the sacraments, a customer can ‘buy’ access to the sacred and even develop one’s own capacities to access the sacred. In judging whether something is ‘true’ or not, people are encouraged to rely on their own feeling. So religious authority is recognized, but it is familiarized rather than blindly obeyed.

In the case of the popularity of the bookstore of the pastoral centre, the authority the Catholic clergy used to exercise over people’s worldview is diminished by the personal access to knowledge and sacred texts afforded by the books sold in the pastoral centre, a recognisably Catholic institution. Although alien and far away, there is no obligation to accept the authority of the author of any book. After all, books exercise less social pressure than persons. However, since the pastoral centre sells it, the knowledge imparted is felt to be reliable.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The way people relate to religious power and authority is crucial in understanding the role these play in present-day moral orientation. Although the life of most people in the village community might be outwardly very conforming, not deviating from the paths that the church demarcates, no one would see this in terms of obedience to church rules, but rather as the result of their own choices, their own evaluations of what is good and right, how things should be done, in short, as the result of ‘responsible behaviour’. In principle, different lifestyles are not rejected as wrong, although they may be experienced as disturbing when they come too close. In guarding the boundaries of the safe and familiar world of the local community, Catholicism plays an important part, but in a way that is very different from the role the church used to give itself in defending its flock. Catholicism has to be kept alive, if not the beliefs, then at least the ‘feeling’ as part of the general feeling of belonging to a particular place. At the same time, the familiar has to be defended against intrusion by religious authorities.

Acquiring the emblems of Catholicism and the celebration of the life cycle rituals take on new meanings: to the older generation, it signifies the continuity of life from one generation to the other, despite the many differences. To the younger generation, it might mean this, and many other things besides: an expression of personal belief, conformity to tradition and community expectations and a token of respect to the world their parents created for them. The ritual practices associated with acquiring these emblems provide entrance points for both progressive and neo-conservative Catholic

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*The slogan of the Catholic broadcasting service KRO (one of the remnants of the Catholic pillar) is ‘het gevoel blijft’, meaning something like ‘the feeling (or sentiment) remains’.*

100
discourses to wield power and attempt a religious re-signification. Catholicism is
instrumental to the familiar, and the familiar is instrumental to Catholicism for
providing ‘missionary moments’ such as death, baptism and the first Holy Communion.

The explicit rules and regulations issued by Catholic authorities such as the
pope, the bishop and the parish priest are usually ignored, even deemed too irrelevant
to even want to change them. There is still an almost magical belief in ‘progress’: most
people seem to believe that the moral rules of the church are outdated and will in time
be changed: ‘dat is toch niet meer van deze tijd!’ (It’s so outdated!). Professionals might
get indignant about the morality of the church, if it applies within their domain, but
otherwise the conflict between these values and the general consensus embodied in the
familiar world is downplayed without argument.

One occasion where the values of the familiar come up against the institutional
power of the church are the last rites. Having a Catholic funeral means different things
to the people involved, but it is usually considered the only option apart from an
anonymous, cold funeral. In the negotiations about the funeral mass, the participation of
the family, the songs and prayers chosen, differing evaluations of the meaning and
worth of individual life are at stake.

To the family and close friends, the rituals, especially the last rites, become
occasions to create and deepen the shared sense of the meaningfulness of life. Whereas
the older generation was taught to believe in the ‘automatic’ efficacy of performing the
rituals correctly and praying for the dead, the younger generation puts more emphasis
on the ‘psychological’ importance of these rituals, to accompany the process of
mourning and to share the event of someone close to them dying to reflect on ultimate
meanings and affirm ties, to express that they care that this person has died. Catholic
rituals bridge these differences in the familiar context: to most people, a ‘good’ death is
one where a person dies having received the sacrament of the sick, and is sent off with a
funeral mass and commemoration services. This creates a situation where the power of
disapproval of the church might once again be felt.

The narratives about the role of priests in the last rites indicate that the role of
the church is not taken for granted anymore, that the attitudes, values and beliefs of the
younger generations do not tolerate authoritative pronouncements on what is supposed
to be morally good and bad. It also shows that on some occasions, people feel that they
cannot do without the church, even though, as the pre-war generation puts it, ‘they have
their own beliefs’. But most importantly, it shows that there is a strong sentiment among
the post-war generation, especially the women, to protect the intersubjectively shared
world of values against authoritarian interference. They have nothing against the church
per se, as long as the attitude of the priest towards this intersubjectively shared world is
respectful, does not try to subvert their expressions. A priest who sabotages or subverts
the attempts of a family to express how much they cared about the deceased, or who
invokes the power of disapproval of the church, can count on being painted as a ‘villain’
and a ‘psychopath’.

101
We might say that the ‘relational grounding of morality’ (Gullestad 1996:23) is more important to people than consistency on the abstract level of discourse. Catholicism in the community is a link with a shared past and a way to mark the community sharing this past. For most people, it would take more than a dogmatic bishop to break this link, as we can see in the struggle around the label ‘RK’ between Gijsen and the schools. Although Catholicism and Catholic practices mark the familiar, church life and community life might go separate ways, especially in Welden. If you don’t like your local church, you can go to another one without any serious consequences. Specialized religious repertoires have also made their entrance, and with the popularity of New Age in the Netherlands in general, localized but fragmented and obscure traditions of spiritualism have been infused with new life. One of the attractions of alternative spiritualities and commoditized forms of traditional religions is that relationships in this domain have a built-in freedom, so its importance cannot be measured by the traditional criterion of ‘membership’. Neither however, does it rely exclusively on the authority of the (divine) self. Rather, it caters to a complex and ambivalent attitude towards authority that in Limburg has a lot to do with the history of Catholicism in the region.

Most importantly, commoditized religion can be easily integrated into the familiar domain; religious authority and expertise in ‘contacting the sacred’ is recognized but held at a safe distance. It is exactly the sensitiveness to authority that makes the wielding of it so dangerous. Even in the case where people turn to repertoires of alternative spirituality, authority outside the self is an important subject of debate and moralising, as we will see in the next chapter.

How should moral orientation within this landscape be characterized? It is certainly not ‘individualist’ in the sense that it is focused on the individual discovery and construction of meaning. Rather, it is the ‘individual in context’, the individual in a role as mother, daughter, son, friend, pillar of the community. The main value celebrated in the rites around death and dying is not the uniqueness of an individual and his or her subjective life, but his or her value to other people, and the fact that his family and friends care. It is a sacralization and celebration not of the self, but of the familiar.
CHAPTER 5: THE SPIRITUAL ASSOCIATION OF THE HILLS

1. Introduction

At the end of the previous chapter I introduced a religious repertoire that has been less decisive in shaping the landscape and moral horizons in Limburg historically, but that is firmly part of it nevertheless, and growing in visibility and influence. In religious studies, the rise of alternative spiritualities generally labelled as New Age and neopaganism has become a subject of much debate. Although the subject is relatively new, there are already a few classics in the field, such as Heelas’ study ‘The New Age Movement’, which analyses New Age as a more radical rendering of key aspects of modernity, and Hanegraaff’s elaborate review of New Age as a result of the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment (Hanegraaff 1995; Heelas 1996). In the Netherlands, there is Aupers’ and Otterloo’s useful review of the history of New Age in the Netherlands and Ramstedt’s recent work on the normalization of alternative spiritualities in Dutch culture (Aupers and Otterloo 2000; Ramstedt 2004; Ramstedt forthcoming; Ramstedt forthcoming 2007). Cultural critics, philosophers and theologians also find the subject intriguing, seeing in it possible counter-evidence to the dominant representation of modern western associations as thoroughly disenchanted and modernized (Harskamp 2000; Hervieu-Léger 1993; Woodhead, Heelas et al. 2001). However, they also feel challenged by its ‘copy-paste’ attitude to religious traditions and worry about its insistence on ‘the self’ as the ultimate source of meaning and authority. The increasing popularity of alternative spiritualities therefore has a special place in the ‘post secularization’ debate, and is often used as a starting point for a critique of present-day society (Bauman 1997; Bauman 2001). The ‘spiritual revolution’ forms the background to many cultural criticisms and philosophical moralizing, and, as we will see, is itself very moralizing. Furthermore, the prediction of a ‘spiritual revolution’ makes it even more interesting to look at how alternative spiritualities are used for moral orientation.

In the field of religious studies, much is known about the history and key beliefs of New Age and the assorted ‘alternative spiritualities’ associated with New Age. Often, these studies are based on literature, historical sources and surveys, like the ones mentioned above. Detailed ethnographic studies of the way people interact and live their worldview in the New Age scene are relatively scarce. The research presented in this chapter aims to provide a view of how people who describe themselves as involved in New Age and spirituality in fact use these ideas and how they interact. The group described here, moreover, has its roots in a long-standing tradition of spiritualist associations in the Netherlands as I described in the previous chapter.

On one of my first visits to Welden, I noticed a flyer on the announcement board of the community centre for flower séances held there regularly, led by the medium Maria Bemelmans⁶. When I asked some volunteers about these séances, I was told that

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⁶ I do not know if this is a pseudonym or not, but it is a common enough name in Limburg.
people from all over the area would come there to get a message from their deceased relatives.

For our MA-thesis, a fellow student and I had done research on the medium Jomanda, who had gained national fame (or notoriety) in the 90ies, drawing large crowds to her healings (Knibbe and Westra 2001; Knibbe and Westra Westra 2003). Many of the people I had interviewed for this research came from the area around Welden. They had mentioned Maria Bemelmans, and several others, as well as the existence of ‘spiritual associations’ and paranormal markets, which they frequented. These phenomena all seemed to be connected. According to our informants at the time, Jomanda used to be a part of the circuit of local spiritual associations in the seventies and eighties, touring the community centres much like Maria Bemelmans seemed to be doing at the time of my PhD research. When Jomanda suddenly burst out onto the national scene in the early 90ies, drawing crowds of thousands of people who hoped for a miraculous cure, many opinion makers in the media expressed their bewilderment over this seemingly ‘irrational’ phenomenon in the rational and sober Netherlands. Because her fame spread at the time when ‘New Age’ was also growing in visibility in the Netherlands, entering mainstream culture, she was often interpreted as a symptom of the same cultural developments: a desire for meaning in a disenchanted, coldly rational world, a resurgence of belief in miracles, part of the general trend towards sacralization.

In our MA-thesis, we concluded that the roots of ‘Jomanda’ went much further back in time than the relatively recent popular interest in New Age. In chapter 4, I linked this to the popularity of spiritualism in the Netherlands since the late nineteenth century, trickling down from intellectual and royal circles to the lower classes. So except for the scale her practice was able to reach, Jomanda was in fact not a unique or new phenomenon in the Netherlands\(^4\). Although she attracted a lot of ‘tourists’, the main core of her visitors were middle aged men and women (predominantly women) with a lower class Catholic background and a low level of education. This public is vastly different from the public that ‘New Age’ attracts according to most studies done in the Netherlands and elsewhere: highly educated middle class women of the baby boom generation, with a leftist orientation (Aupers and Otterloo 2000:106-109), young people sceptical towards science (Houtman and Mascini 2002), people who belong to the category of ‘expressivists’ in the classification of Inglehart (Heelas 1996: 120). But it is very similar to the public attracted to the Spiritual Association and to the paranormal markets\(^5\).

Apart from the regular séances of Maria Bemelmans in the community centre of Welden, and the presence of Jomanda in nearby Valkenburg where she had established

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\(^4\) This was largely due to her (ex-)husband’s skill in manipulating the mass media.

\(^5\) Unfortunately, I did not do a survey among the people of the Spiritual Association or the paranormal markets.
a more permanent practice, I noticed that the meetings of a ‘spiritual association’ were prominently advertised in the municipal calendar, along with other community activities such as bowling, bingo and gymnastics for the elderly. These meetings took place in another community center in one of the villages within the municipality of Welden. The announced activities for the years 2001 and 2002 ranged from séances and healings to workshops and lectures for members to develop their paranormal powers and follow up interest in spirituality. The meetings of this association, and those of others in the surroundings, were also advertised in the local freely distributed Sunday papers. New Age and alternative spiritualities, therefore, were definitely a visible phenomenon from within the local horizons of Welden and the surrounding villages.

The association where I did participant observation, called ‘The Spiritual Association of the Hills’, had both ‘closed nights’, when only members were welcome and ‘open nights’. During closed nights, the members would practice their own paranormal powers and discuss esoteric subjects in depth. On open nights, everybody was welcome to attend the lecture, séance or healing. The persons leading the open nights would be invited from the other spiritual associations in the area, and sometimes someone from another province. During closed nights, members would teach each other. I attended both kinds of evenings.

In practice, the division between open and closed evenings was not so strict; non-members would also be admitted to the closed nights. Both the open and the closed nights were announced in the municipal calendar I mentioned earlier. In fact, the Spiritual Association of the Hills was one of the best advertised spiritual associations in the region: besides the local calendar, they would advertise their evenings in the free weekly newspaper and put up posters in strategic places for the ‘open nights’. This publicity was mainly due to the efforts of the informal leader and founder of this Association, Beth. At the end of my research period, when she stepped back and asked others to take, it became clear that it would take some time before they would be able to organize the Association as smoothly as she had done. In the years 2003 and 2004 the activities of the Association were not listed on the municipal calendar anymore.

In the Spiritual Association of the Hills the public was usually a mix of a few ‘import’ people and locals from several different villages. In this setting the difference seemed to be unimportant, perhaps because the import people who visited here were well integrated into local horizons: only people who follow the local news, read the free Sunday-papers and pay attention to the local activities listed in the municipal calendar would know about these meetings.

There was a group of about thirty regulars, people who attended because they were interested in developing their own paranormal or healing powers. Not all of these people would attend every session: there was a core group of volunteers who came

* The local term for people from outside of Limburg, or even, strictly speaking, from outside the local community.
every session, led by Beth and her husband. They would set up the chairs and tables, put out the leaflets, sell the entrance tickets and manage the sound system. Many members were mediums and psychics who had their own practice. They would attend some meetings for their own specific reasons (e.g. to learn from a more experienced medium or get a message) or to teach during the closed nights. These practitioners usually had their own personal following of friends and relatives who turned to them for help and advice, meditated together and practiced magnetism, reiki, tarot and other esoteric practices with each other. Especially when there was a séance or a ‘reading’ (of aura’s, objects, handprints, candle wax drawings), many new faces suddenly appeared, swelling the audience: people who had just lost somebody and hoped to get a message, people who were in a personal crisis or concerned about somebody close to them, a few who seemed to be in ‘perpetual’ crisis, barely hanging on to sanity. These séances and readings also drew the curious, who hoped to find in it the evidence they needed to believe the claims of the mediums and psychics about the existence of ‘the other side’.

The atmosphere was always very friendly. Although there was also a lot of secretiveness on the part of some people, this was counteracted by the character of Beth, who insisted on openness and clarity in everything. She was generally recognized as the informal leader and had the last word in any discussion. Although her husband was usually very silent, he was considered an authority as well, because he was said to have written several books⁶. He led some meditation and therapy groups.

Newcomers would usually feel apprehensive because of the nature of the meetings, but they were never regarded as intruders, however sceptic they were or unfamiliar with how to behave. The entrance fee for the evenings was about two euro, with a discount for members (and for me, a ‘poor student’), just enough to cover the cost of hiring a space in the community centre and the posters.

The main ideas and key concepts that people in this setting refer to are the subject of the first section of this chapter, as well as their historical background. They will be introduced through a description of some of the central practices in this setting and the narrative that emerged from these practices over several meetings. The second section describes some of the main themes for moralizing: personhood and responsibility, the limits of power in personal relationships and the moralizing that is embedded in the way people actually treat each other and in gossip. The third section is a further characterization and contextualization of the beliefs of this setting, picking up the discussion on alternative spirituality and consumerism in chapter 4. The chapter ends with some conclusions and a discussion. Before moving on with this chapter however, I elaborate some more on the actual fieldwork and how I moved in this context as a participant observer.

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⁶ Which I never saw and did not find anywhere, by the way. And he was too unapproachable and taciturn to ask

106
Methodological notes

I was interested in the spiritual association because it seemed to mix ‘classic’ spiritualist activities such as séances and healings with more ‘New Age’ sounding things such as lectures on dreaming, pyramids etc. Participating in the various activities of this association also gave me the opportunity to talk to several different psychics, mediums and other practitioners informally and see how they interacted. I decided not to attend the séances in the Welden community centre because I knew from experience that séances often draw people that are very preoccupied with their own problems and grief: they expect to get a message from ‘the other side’ from a deceased relative. This would make ‘participant observation’ too much like voyeurism for my taste, especially in a rural community setting where anonymity is impossible. Besides, I knew that people going to these séances usually do not want this to be generally known, so that meant they would be uncomfortable with me if I would meet them somewhere else in Welden.

I contacted the founder of the Spiritual Association of the Hills, Beth, and explained the purpose of my research to her. In our first conversation she was positive about the idea that I would do research; ‘after all, we’re all searchers’. But she discouraged me to visit other groups. She admitted that she could not stop me from doing that, but at least, I should be very careful. Some groups, according to her, were prone to power games by the leading medium of that group. They emphasized too strongly their own paranormal powers, and held the members of the Association in their thrall. She had set up her own Association precisely to avoid this situation; there was no one medium who played a bigger role than another, and she herself was not a medium.

In fact, I did not attend other spiritual associations, not only because of her objections but also because I did not have any means of transport from the place I was staying to the meetings of the other associations (the buses stop running at night). But I did talk to the mediums and psychics who led these societies on the paranormal markets and when they came to visit the Spiritual Association of the Hills. Later in this chapter, it will become clear that distrust and a critical attitude towards practitioners such as mediums and psychics are an intrinsic part of this scene.

Of all the contexts described in this book, this was the easiest place to do research. Although I never managed to explain well enough what my research was about, people did not really care: I was young, I was a ‘seeker’ and therefore had to be protected, mothered and taken care of. Usually, I found myself with Jacky, who would also give me a ride to these meetings. She was a very down to earth person, forever despairing that she ‘did not feel anything’: she did not feel energies, or see aura’s or receive any of the other paranormal perceptions, signs and coincidences that people keenly discussed among each other.60 It suited me fine to have a sober person like her to link with; she was a stabilizing presence in an otherwise creatively unstable and

* Of course, one might wonder why she kept coming. The social dimension of this association should not be underestimated. This will be further discussed in the second part of this chapter.
sometimes unsettling environment where anybody could start telling you, out of the blue, how to conduct your love-life, or that your deceased grandmother was standing behind you.

The descriptions and narratives presented here are constructed out of participant observations during the formal part of the evenings, informal conversations at the bar during breaks and after the meetings, listening to the advice to others and myself during the informal talk after the meetings. I also did some interviews with practitioners, but most practitioners did not like to be interviewed. They explained their reluctance by saying they felt that the core of their work could not be explained in words, they actually distrusted interviews as a means for gaining understanding of their practices and some psychics were actually very bad at expressing themselves verbally. They also disliked personal questions of how they became a medium or psychic, deeming personal circumstances irrelevant to understanding what their work was about⁴⁵. In these cases I confined myself to informal ways of interviewing.

The whole point of the association was to develop people’s own powers to get in touch with the ‘evidence’ that there is ‘more’ between heaven and earth than is usually accepted. Rather than discussing their worldview and teaching it as a doctrine, the practices of the Association were designed to enable people to ‘see for themselves’ and figure things out from their own personal experience.

Participant observation and informal conversations and interviews are standard fieldwork techniques in anthropology. However in the context of practices connected to alternative spirituality and New Age there is usually an exceptionally heavy emphasis on experience, altered states of consciousness and bodily techniques that would be unfamiliar for most researchers. This makes it necessary to reflect more on the ‘participant’ side of anthropology’s favourite method.

Participating in the practices of the spiritual Association is difficult for researchers who do not share the beliefs of these people. To researchers who are indifferent to these beliefs, or look down at them as superstitions or the product of an overactive imagination, it could be embarrassing to follow suggestions such as ‘open yourself to the divine energies’. How can you open yourself to something you don’t believe in?

In my case, I would go along with these suggestions and imagine myself ‘opening to the divine energies’ during meditations at the beginning of a meeting.

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⁴ Because of this difficulty I had in formally interviewing practitioners I did a private course in Tarot cards with one practitioner in Welden. After this course, she agreed to a short interview. But during the sessions, she had already provided me with a lot of information on the local networks in and around Welden. Besides her and Beth, whom I also interviewed formally, I found two other informants who had been involved in several spiritual associations in the eighties and since turned to the Christian Pastoral Centre, who provided me with a lot of background information.
leaving aside the question whether I actually believed in them or not. Although in describing this setting I confine myself to a position of methodological agnosticism, in doing participant observation I was more of a methodological ‘judist’ (Droogers 1999). This approach to the study of religion takes the human ability to play as its point of departure. In this way, the research of religion could be done more ‘seriously’, with more respect for the believer’s point of view. ‘Play’ in this case is defined as the human ability to handle two ways of understanding reality at the same time: ‘as is’ and ‘as if’.

The question remains whether the boundaries between ‘as if’ (in this case the ‘reality’ of ‘the other side’, the divine world) and ‘as is’ (in this case: how I as an agnostic researcher interpret the world) can be so strictly defined. In fact, part of the experience of fieldwork for most anthropologists who study religion is that these boundaries are often threatened or breached or that the difference between the two becomes a sliding scale: the researcher identifies with the people he is doing his research with to the extent that he starts sharing their outlook on life.

However, in my case, during the participant observation with the spiritual Association of the Hills, these boundaries were more or less strictly defined. Although, like the other participants, I sometimes had strange bodily experiences (like my wriggling fingers in the narrative below) and certainly entered different states of consciousness, I do not really attach much meaning to these things. To me, feeling dizzy, having your fingers start moving involuntarily, swaying in your chair and the things that you can see while under hypnosis did not mean anything of shattering existential importance. Of course, these phenomena did not leave me completely indifferent either. I personally considered them to be techniques of consciousness and the body that have a particular persuasiveness to people (especially in the ‘rational’ Netherlands where these phenomena are seen as exceptional and strange) and certainly help to fix meanings memorably. But I would not normally see these phenomena as ‘signs from the other side’, or as objective evidence that my grandmother or my spirit guides wanted to tell me something. As an anthropologist, I knew that the so-called ‘paranormal perceptions’ and phenomena discussed in this context could be interpreted in many different ways.

In knowing this, and in the distancing from what happened to my body and my consciousness that resulted from this knowledge, I was different from the other people participating in the context of the Spiritual Association of the Hills. I did not hide this difference but it was not seen as very important in this group, where sceptics and newcomers mingled easily with the ‘true believers’ and practitioners and speculation on the most outlandish ideas was regular fare during conversations.

By participating the way I did, I became aware of how the practices can make sense on a very personal, emotional and physical level, even if I personally came to

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70 During my MA-research with Jomanda I had already learnt to deal with the consequences of participating in a context that has a strong focus on evoking and interpreting bodily experience and changes of consciousness.
different conclusions. Furthermore, it enabled me to see that although the techniques of the body and consciousness encouraged and taught here are directed at the individual, they are in fact part of collectively shared repertoires, and connect with collectively shared dispositions.

2. A MORAL TALE

On a Wednesday-evening at 8 o’clock I arrived by bicycle at the community centre. Inside, the meeting of the ‘Spiritual Association of the Hills’ had already started. I found a seat at the back, careful not to disturb anyone. There were about 40 people present, men and women, many couples. In front, the leader of the night’s event was telling the audience how he became a medium. His voice was low and very calm. I settled in and listened:

‘I used to be a successful businessman, owning a video store and developing other kinds of businesses. At some point things started going wrong. In a few years I lost almost everything. Those were very dark times, and often I didn’t know whether I had the strength to survive. But somehow, in the middle of all this, I noticed a small light. I latched onto this light, and I haven’t let it get out of my sight since. I went to a medium in Eindhoven51 for help, who always insisted on greeting me as “colleague”. Many times I told her: “but I am not your colleague, I am not a medium”. Yet, here I am.’

He explained what he was going to do: some people would be invited to sit on a chair in front of the audience.

‘I am warning you, it will not be spectacular. But you will hear from these people after their treatment that what they have experienced goes very deep. The audience will only see them sitting still, while I pass my hands around their bodies to unblock their energies. Sometimes I whisper something in their ears.’

While he was explaining this, I moved more to the front, until I sat next to Jacky. We whispered hello, and I greeted some other people I knew. Before inviting anyone to come forward, the medium led a meditation accompanied by soft music, urging us to open ourselves to the divine energies, to feel ourselves and to love ourselves. He told us that loving yourself is the prerequisite to be able to give love to others. By being in harmony with yourself, our energies would harmonize with the energies of those around us to create a warm and loving atmosphere receptive to the divine energies. The more we did this, the easier his own work would be. Later into the healing he complimented us: ‘you see, I am sweating, that does not always happen. I get so warm because you are a very good public, creating a good atmosphere’.

51 A city in the province just to the north of Limburg, also predominantly Catholic
During this meditation everybody in the audience was holding hands. On my left I was holding the hand of Jacky, on my right the hand of a man I had never spoken to although I had seen him around before. I followed the instructions for meditation, relaxing. Suddenly, a strange sensation started up in my right arm. It tingled, and my fingers started moving of their own accord, inside the man’s hand. I tried to hold them still, but it was difficult. As soon as seemed proper I let go of the man’s hand, and put my own hand on top of my knee. My fingers just would not stop wriggling.

Although surprised, I did not wonder about it very much: during my MA research I had already found that attending healings where you are constantly being told to pay attention to what you’re feeling, you are bound to feel all kinds of strange things, from dizziness to swaying to paralysis. I ignored the wriggling, and concentrated on the question of how the people of the spiritual group would explain this phenomenon, planning to bring it up as soon as I got the chance. After all, it was exactly the kind of phenomenon that they liked to discuss and speculate on.

After the meditation, some people were invited to sit in front, on chairs facing the audience. The medium walked around these people, passing his hand around their auras without physically touching them. Following the cue of Beth and her husband, most people sat with their palms facing upwards in meditation, receptive to the divine energies. Although I kept my eyes open to observe, I decided to take notes afterwards, so as not the break this atmosphere of intense concentration and stillness. The atmosphere relaxed after a few minutes though, so I took out my notebook to jot down who was being treated and what the medium was telling them.

He stopped to talk to one woman and she opened her eyes (the others remained seated with their eyes closed). He commented that she probably did not feel so much, because she couldn’t let go of her thoughts to ‘return to herself’. She answered: ‘Yes, it seems to be so simple, but somehow I cannot manage to do it!’ The medium left it at that, and she returned to the audience. He turned to An, who was one of the regular visitors and a friend of Jacky. She was just opening her eyes. He told her:

‘you are a very levelheaded person but you should learn to love yourself more. You have been raised with a heavy emphasis on doing your duty, but you have to learn to arrange your own priorities. Maybe at first people will be a bit angry when you say no to their requests, but they will not mind later on, and come to understand.’

She nodded, and confirmed his description of how she was raised. But when he told her she should give more weight to her own priorities, she protested: ‘I thought I was doing that already!’ ‘Perhaps, but you still take other people’s needs more seriously than your own’. After this exchange, An joined Jacky and me in the audience. Of course we were dying to hear what she had felt while sitting there, but we did not quite dare to ask her directly for fear of intruding. Her only comment to us was: ‘at least I got rid of that terrible headache I had all day!’
To another of the regular members, Pete, the medium said: ‘I think you have been able to experience a more tranquil mood than usual’. Pete nodded. After the healing he told me that he also felt that he was becoming very drowsy and heavy limbed; an unusual state for him (he was a hyperactive person). The medium told him:

‘Actually, you should hold yourself more often, to make yourself happy. That goes for everybody. Put your hands on your stomach, and if you press just a little bit, you will feel the energy start to flow. That’s how you can make yourself more peaceful. It’s very important to do this before you go to sleep. When I go to sleep, I always take five minutes for myself, and three minutes later I am snoring. While my wife is still awake because of all her worries.’

He gave some more explanation, about the difference between the chakra’s\(^{12}\): the place of your emotions is not the heart, as many people think, but the stomach, the place where things to do with self-love take place. Your heart is the centre of your love for other people.

After this short speech he invited the next batch of people to come to the front and be treated. Some people were told that they would be invited after the break because their treatment was going to take longer. Again there was music and a meditation, but, lucky for me, we were not asked to hold hands again. This time the comments of the medium had more to do with their spiritual development. Another regular, a lady who usually accompanied Pete was told that soon she would start experiencing all sorts of things ‘on the spiritual plane’ (i.e. paranormal perceptions such as receiving images, seeing aura’s, hearing messages etc.). The mediums advice was not to panic and to stay calm and leave those things alone until their meaning became clear to her. He told Jeff, a regular and a sceptic, that he had a very big heart, but that he should open up more, also to men. ‘Just do it, just try it out, why not?’ After the healing, Jeff complained that the advice of the medium did not make sense to him, as usual, because he did not ‘feel’ anything.

There was a short break and everybody went to the bar to get some coffee or tea and talk. I said hello to a few more people, but there was no time for more conversation, because the healing started again. This time, the interpretations of the medium met with resistance by one of the women who was invited to sit in front. She looked like she did not usually come to this kind of meetings, and in the exchange it was noticeable that she did not know the ‘lingo’, or recognize his line of reasoning (which were very

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\(^{12}\) The theory of the chakras is adapted from Indian yogic philosophy. A chakra is an energy centre in the body. In this context, each of the seven main chakras is associated with the colours of the aura, which can be seen through paranormal perception. On paranormal markets, there are stands with machines to take pictures of your aura or measure the energy of your chakras to discover ‘blocks’ in the energy flows, which might cause spiritual, mental and health problems. The energy of these chakras can also be felt by holding your hands a little bit away from the body.
recognizable to me as they would be to anybody who had participated in this scene for some time).

First he told her that she was a very good person, always doing everything she could for other people. ‘But you don’t get the gratitude you think you deserve. And that is painful for you.’ At this, she almost burst out in tears and just nodded her head. Then, he told her that the only way to deal with this was to learn how to give without expecting anything in return. She protested indignantly that she did not expect anything in return. He tried again, saying that she obviously did, because she felt hurt by the ingratitude of people, but she refused to accept this and she returned to her friends in the audience feeling offended.

He moved on to a lady who only recently started visiting the Association regularly with her husband: ‘I don’t think you really felt anything, did you? You might as well have stayed in the audience.’ She nodded. ‘You are very curious, and you would really like to feel and experience everything, but I will tell you now, it will take at least two years before anything will start happening with you on the spiritual plane! You can hold me to that prediction, everybody, two years!’

After the healing, Jeff, Jacky, Beth and her husband and some other people happened to be talking about the guy (I will call him Matt) that was holding my right hand. Some of them had gone on a trip with him to England, visiting places where the energies of the earth are supposed to be particularly strong such as Glastonbury. They noted that that he enjoyed showing off his paranormal powers, especially to young women. He claimed to be a psychic, which some people doubted, and a magnetist\(^\text{27}\), which was less controversial (magnetizing was not considered to be very hard, although some people have more ‘energy’ than others). I took the chance to tell them about my wriggling fingers. They concluded that Matt was probably magnetizing me. So I asked ‘but why would he do that without asking me?’ Well, that was not a very ethical thing of him to do, they agreed. ‘It was probably to arouse your interest in him, but of course it is not right to magnetize you without consent’. They were all laughing and joking now: that guy is something else, very stubborn, always after the women. During the trip to England, when they told him he should not use his powers like that, he denied it and just continued doing it anyway. According to Jeff the young women travelling with them were afraid of him. Jacky asked me: are you afraid of him? I assured them I was not afraid; I just thought it was strange that my fingers started wriggling while holding his hand.

Then, Jacky remembered what a psychic told Matt just before summer, Diane Veer. She was invited from Rotterdam to read and draw people’s auras and Jacky and I

\(^{27}\) A magnetist is someone who can heal pains or remove energy ‘blocks’ by using his hands to transfer energy to his patients. Many magnetists are now turning themselves into Reiki-masters (Reiki is a popular New Age practice similar to magnetism, but structured by courses and degrees).
had both attended. She would pick somebody out of the audience, and tell that person what she was seeing; not only colours, but also things that happened recently. Meanwhile, she made a drawing of the aura. She transmitted advice ‘from the other side’ as well. Not everybody in the audience got attention, only the ‘urgent cases’, and Matt was one of them. After Jacky reminded us of this incident I went back to my notes of that evening and found what I had written at the time: When the psychic came to Matt, she said: ‘I’m drawing the aura of that guy over there, the one who has a personal harem’. People in the south are not used to this kind of northern directness, so it took a while for this comment to draw some giggles. She continued:

‘I can see you are a magnetist. And I can see you like women. You surround yourself with women, as if you are a sort of ‘Anton Heyboer’54. And you do not listen to other people warning you when you are going in the wrong direction. Until you crash headlong into a brick wall, you will not change your course. But in the next few months you will notice that the top of your head will start to itch. You will be getting a different kind of energy, that’s why. ‘The other side’ sees that many people in your practice are actually dependent on you. In future, when you heal them, you will get a telephone call about three days after you have treated a person, and each of them will tell you that they have gotten worse. This way, you will know who is dependent on you, and you can do something about it.’

At the time the regulars agreed that it was a polite but very strong warning to Matt that he was abusing his powers to boost his own ego. Now, they conclude, he still didn’t clean up his act, as evidenced by my wriggling fingers55.

Beth told me that next time I was sitting next to him I should just say ‘no’ inside myself very firmly. Then his powers would not be able to penetrate my protection. She also advised me to buy an aquamarine stone for my allergies, and to imagine a dome of St Michael-light around me when cycling home alone in the dark. I thanked everybody for his or her advice, and went home.

This seemed to be the end of the story. But two weeks later, my ‘case’ was raised again while we were having a drink at the bar before a meeting. Jeff was telling the story to Linda, a psychic and a magnetist as well, who was not there when it happened. She had a different view of the event. She asked me which of his hands I had been holding. ‘The left hand’, I replied. ‘Well, then, he couldn’t have been the person giving you the energy. The left hand is the “drawing hand”, receiving energy’. Her explanation for my wriggling fingers was that Matt must have ‘blocked’ himself from receiving the energy.

54 Anton Heyboer (deceased 2005) was an artist who was cared for by several women who also were his lovers. He was still alive at the time.

55 During a later session, he got another warning from a psychic who claimed to see an intelligence who looked like Ghandi standing behind him. He was strongly urged to listen to this intelligence.
of the whole group (everybody had been holding hands) and that meant that all the energy circulating from one hand to another was fed into my right arm without finding a way out, causing my fingers to start wriggling. So he had not been magnetizing me, he had just been protecting himself.

Still, Jeff found this objectionable. By blocking himself from the group energy, Matt knew that I would be the end-station, he argued. That’s also not very nice, is it? Linda shrugged: we could understand he had wanted to protect himself. Especially psychics and magnetists are sensitive to other people’s energy.

From my case, the discussion moved on to other healers too much in love with their own powers, unethical and unhealthy telepathic connections between pupils and teachers, and the question whether shamans have the right to ‘put a symbol in the room’ (consisting of energy, and therefore invisible to most people).

Cosmology and core symbols

Although everybody is supposed to find things out by him or herself, to follow his or her ‘own path’, this does not lead to moral relativism or indifference to other people’s behaviour. Of all the contexts of my research, this context was most characterized by explicit moralizing people were not afraid to pass judgment on each other. As shown in the opening story, mediums and psychics can give some pretty strong advice even when people do not agree with them. This made my research easier: moral orientations were very explicitly discussed. But before turning to an interpretation of the moralizing going on between the people in this Association, it is necessary to understand the central ideas that are referred to as points of reference in this moralizing.

These ideas are usually not very clearly outlined, which is why many of the practices of spiritual associations and Jonanda do not make sense to the casual observer. Journalists and even scientists of religion often label the worldview underlying these practices as ‘vague’, inconsistent and idiosyncratic66. When someone joins, they do not get a booklet with information, or an official introduction. People are left to their own devices to figure out what is going on, helped along by explanations such as those of the medium in the first: moral tale, exegesis during informal conversations, tips from others on what books to read, etc. There is no official creed, and there is no limit to the theories people can bring to the discussion or base their practices on. The narrative in the

66 During one conference I attended, a scientist of religion argued that Jonanda does not constitute a religion, because she does not refer to any transcendent realm. However, the whole practice of Jonanda and these spiritual associations is geared towards providing the evidence that the ‘other side’ exists. This scientist failed to appreciate this, because he was looking for a book explaining her doctrine rather than trying to understand her practices. Despite all her references to angels, intelligences and ‘the one source of Light and Love’, this was all too ‘vague’ to constitute a ‘real’ religion according to him. However, by doing participant observation, it became abundantly clear to us that there is a very coherent doctrine with a high degree of plausibility behind her practices, and behind the practices of the spiritual associations.
opening chapter mentioned shamanism, magnetism, hypnosis, parapsychology, the existence of angels, healing with stones and the theory of the chakras. Despite this pluralism, the underlying logic by which these repertoires are used is usually dominated by ideas central to spiritualism and theosophy.

This ‘spiritualist-theosophical’ framework is not connected to any name in particular. When someone asks for more information, the works of Blavatsky, and the Dutch medium Joëf Rulof are sometimes recommended (Blavatsky 1910, Rulof 1984). Blavatsky was a nineteenth century medium who produced many books on her spiritual insights, calling it theosophy. Her books are heavy reading and her theories are extremely detailed and elaborate. As so many mediums still do, she reviled her competitors as charlatans, especially the spiritualists. However, in this context fragments of theosophy were peacefully lumped together with ideas from her former enemies, the spiritualists.

My impression was that only Beth, and perhaps her taciturn husband, had actually read any of Blavatsky’s works. Among each other the regulars more often referred to popular accounts of people who can remember their stay ‘on the other side’ between this life and their previous life or who have been taken there by a ‘guide’, a sort of angel, to take a look. The reports of these guided tours are used to explain what happens during a séance or healing. The accounts of Rulof, brought together in numerous books, are the most famous of these. Jomanda also refers to these books. Although the theories elaborated in these books are very complicated, involving intricate cosmologies that span not only the earth but all the other planets and the universe, there are a few basic ideas that were referred to in moral orientation in this context that I will summarize here.

Common denominators are a belief in reincarnation and a belief in a world (consisting of progressively higher spheres), which is usually invisible and inaccessible in this world but where people go when they die, referred to as ‘the other side’. On ‘the other side’ one can find universities, hospitals, and art schools, music schools etcetera, just like on earth but of course better, more spiritual, more refined. There, the soul develops spiritually, to be able to return to earth and fulfil his or her destiny better and to solve issues from a previous life. These issues are referred to as your ‘karma’, a concept taken from Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. In this context it is taken to mean that everything you have ever done (right or wrong), every ‘attachment’ you have ever made, is somehow stored in energy patterns that you carry with you from one life to the next. These form the ‘blueprint’ of the lessons you will have to learn to progress spiritually.

The spheres collectively labelled as ‘the other side’ have a progressively higher ‘frequency’: the more developed a soul is, the higher the frequency, and the higher the frequency of the sphere he can enter. In some variations, a soul is considered part of a group of souls, many of whom you will also meet on earth. The aim of life on earth is to recognize the (moral) lessons you have to learn to develop spiritually, and to do your
best to help others along the same path towards the ‘Light’, the ultimate sphere where everything and everybody will be one, where everything is pure Love.

Some souls do not find the way to these spheres very easily, they get stuck in between because they do not believe they have died, or are bound to the earth by the strength of their own destructive illusions. It is these entities that are popularly called ghosts (geesten), and are the main reason why trying to communicate with the spirit world without guidance is supposed to be dangerous: these ghosts might attach themselves to you. Thoughts, events that happened a long time ago and emotions all consist of energies. The ‘normal’ everyday world everybody can see is simply a ‘denser’ version of the more refined (and therefore invisible to most people except psychics) energy patterns of the ‘other side’. So in a sense, like in many New Age philosophies, people are supposed to create their own reality. However, it is considered to be an evolving reality: the more one progresses spiritually, the lighter this reality will be, the more love is able to flow freely.

*Spiritism, Spiritualism and Occultism*

The general ideas and the way of believing outlined here can be characterized as occultist according to the distinction Hanegraaff makes between the various modern offshoots of the age-old tradition of esotericism. He defines occultism as a transformation of this tradition in terms of causality under the influence of the rise of scientific thinking (Hanegraaff 1995: 354-372). According to Hanegraaff, occultism according ‘comprises all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world’ (Hanegraaff 1995: 354).

Instrumental in this transformation of esotericism were the works of Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Anton Mesmer. Swedenborg coupled a scientific causal thinking to the esoteric principle of correspondence. The natural world was viewed as subject to causal laws, rather than the laws of correspondence posited by traditional esotericism. In traditional esotericism it was thought that things that are alike, are somehow related and can influence each other (e.g. as in homeopathy) because God has created the world as an meaningful and intelligible whole; likeness, in this thinking, indicates an link. One thing can be studied to reveal knowledge about something that is similar. In spiritualism, the normal world was believed to be governed by the causal laws of science (dominated by a mechanistic natural science perspective) but in the ‘vertical’ dimension the law of correspondence was left intact: ‘as below, so above’ (and the other way around). Heaven is like earth. This was very different from earlier esotericists, who saw nature and the whole world as an enchanted whole of correspondences.

Mesmer too, saw it as his duty to create a ‘scientific’ religion where supernatural phenomena could be proved and explained. He introduced the notion of magnetism to explain phenomena such as hypnosis, which inspired many entrepreneurs in his time and apparently still inspires practices today, as we can see in the story with which this chapter opened. Although Mesmer himself did not see his work as spiritual or religious
in any way, later occultists have integrated his theories within a spiritist/spiritualist framework (Hanegraaff 1995: 361-366).

At the time, his experiments and the phenomena displayed during séances by Swedenborgians aroused a lot of interest among intellectuals and scientists. Historically, Dutch spiritualism (or spiritism as it was called here) is heir to the international movement of spiritualism (Jansen 1994; Sommer 2001), which Hanegraaff characterizes as occultism in its most extreme form, most influenced by the ideals of science. In their opposition to the cold, disenchanted materialism of their time, nineteenth century spiritualists tried to prove the existence of a spiritual world in scientific ways. In this process, they came to see the spiritual world as a higher, more rarefied form of matter.

More than a century later, the people of the Spiritual Association of the Hills see the world and the hereafter as made of the same stuff, namely energy in different frequencies. They maintain, like the nineteenth-century spiritualists described by Hanegraaff, that this energy can be scientifically measured and proven. Much discussion on the relative frequencies of certain stones, numbers, masters (very high intelligences form the other side who can aid in spiritual development) and other therapeutic instruments is the result. When an explanation for seemingly contradictory evidence is needed, energy is now the concept that explains and connects everything. Even the most disparate ideas and interpretations can be translated into each other by referring to differences in frequencies of energy57.

The interest of ‘real scientists’ in paranormal phenomena has waned considerably since the nineteenth century, but the ideas and practices of spiritualism and its pretensions to be ‘scientific’ have been popularized. However, we should not forget what it means when Hanegraaff places spiritualism in the broader category of Romanticism. The emphasis on individuality and personal experience that characterizes all currents under this heading is part and parcel of the main ideas supported in the Spiritual Association of the Hills and the networks around it. This means that the framework as explicated by the ‘experts’ should become an embodied epistemology, second nature.

Hammer has shown for various kinds of alternative spirituality, that the epistemology posited by these theories becomes part of the way one approaches the world, identifies and solves problems (Hammer 2001). However, his work is based almost exclusively an on a review of emic literature. In the ethnographic descriptions in this chapter, and also in our work on Jomanda, the individual struggle to be able to see, feel, hear and experience the paranormal becomes apparent. This worldview is not

57 The role of the concept of ‘energy’ seems to be of a later date and seems to reintroduce the principle of correspondence in a more literally causal way. It would be interesting if someone could make a historical study of the various popular magazines on paranormal phenomena to see when and how this concept developed and came to take the central place it does today.
something one can learn from a book, as every practitioner told me. Indeed, you have to literally grow into it, train your perceptions.

The way it is described ideal-typically by the experts in the context of the Spiritual Association of the Hills (e.g. in the narrative of the medium described above), is that a person setting out on a path of spiritual development will have strange experiences, identified loosely as ‘paranormal’. Often, this is connected to a tragic event such as the death of one’s son or spouse. The more a person learns about the ‘other side’, the more he will be able to correctly interpret these strange experiences. In the end, they are ‘normal’ to him: it becomes normal to see auras, to have premonitions, dreams predicting someone’s death, to ‘see’ things shown by ‘the other side’. There is a subtle hierarchy at work among the members of these associations: the more one treats these things as ‘normal’, the higher one’s credibility. In this Association it was Beth, who did not claim to have any kind of paranormal powers, who was most respected. Among other members, conversations about experiences classified as paranormal always had a certain strained character to them, because people were simultaneously trying to convey the extent of their paranormal powers, and trying very hard to appear nonchalant about it.

These were the basic beliefs and conventions referred to by the experts (like Beth and her husband, psychics and mediums) when discussion got tangled and things needed to be clarified9. In my notes, I found one particularly clear example of ‘exegesis’ where this framework and these conventions were explicated and put to use to provide moral orientation.

Another moral tale

Of the main event of that evening I do not have very interesting notes, because it was a ‘sound healing’: a young couple showed us the various instruments they had collected over the years (gongs, flutes, didgeridoos, drums) and their therapeutic use. As usual, people went to the bar to have a drink and chat afterwards. There was a newcomer who stayed on with the regulars: Beth and her husband, Jeff, a herbalist and dream interpreter with her husband and a friend of theirs, and a silent lady of Indonesian background with her daughter.

It became clear that the newcomer needed to talk. He told us that his wife died recently, but that he had received two messages via the medium Maria Beemans. He asked about the other associations in the area, if those mediums were any good. There was the usual veiled discussion with the people ‘in the know’ implying that they did not want to make any explicit statements, while making it clear they did not approve of

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9 In a book published recently by a medium of one of the other associations in the south of Limburg, she explains more or less the same basic ideas. The title also confirms the code of nonchalance described here: ‘Paranormal, not so abnormal’ (paranormaal, niets buitengewoons) (Schels and Verhaar 2002)
those associations because this or that medium was power mad, or charged people for
everything or only tapped into the ‘lower astral sphere’29.

The stranger then introduced the subject of ‘out of body experiences’, saying he
had been experimenting with them. This got a lot of disapproving attention: ‘You have
to be careful not to get lost due to your fascination with the paranormal’. Beth
admonished him:

‘It’s the spiritual that counts, not all those nice little miracles. That’s the
problem with those people who just come to the séances and never come to a
lecture, they just want a message from the other side, thinking that will solve
all their problems, or to experience something spectacular.’

The talk went on like this for a while, with the other regulars agreeing in their
disapproval of this passive and sensationalist attitude.

But then, the newcomer managed to get everybody’s attention back onto his case:
he told them how he once heard two of his spirit guides arguing with each other while
he was urinating. Everybody fell silent in astonishment. I had never heard a story like
this, where a person claimed he could overhear entities from ‘the other side’ arguing
with each other. Usually ‘lay’ people would be less certain in their descriptions about
extra-ordinary perceptions. This story did not fit into the normal framework.

Apparently the others thought so too, but for a different reason: ‘from up there,
you mean? But that’s impossible, they don’t argue!’ The newcomer then explained the
whole situation: at the time, he was living next to a house inhabited by a heroin addict.
Other addicts often came over, and they would play loud techno music and generally
make his life miserable. When he went to pee, he had come to the point that he was
thinking: ‘now it’s enough, I’m going to kill that man’. And that’s when he heard the
two voices arguing. He couldn’t hear what they were saying though. He was especially
angry with his neighbours because of his wife, who was often alone at home with that
‘scum’ just next door. She had bone cancer so she was always in pain. After years of
living in that hell, he began thinking: ‘scum like this should not be allowed to walk the
earth; it’s just too much to bear’.

When he finished his story, the regulars all began talking at once: ‘no, you
shouldn’t think like that! You can’t decide something that for someone else’ [when
somebody should die]. Beth frantically searched for words:

‘Just look at it from an esoteric point of view! That addict wasn’t living next to
you by accident! Apparently, the two of you had something to teach each
other. You can’t say for him what his lesson should be. But you can say for

29 This is the same accusation Blavatsky used against the spiritualists. The astral sphere is that of
the spirits who got lost between the worlds because of unfinished business or because they do
not believe they have died or that there is a heaven.
Defensively, the stranger replied: ‘I know all that, somewhere, but at a moment like that you can’t think that way. Because I’m sure that’s why my wife got cancer. Out of pure frustration’.

The others exchanged meaningful glances: ‘see, that’s it, it’s the frustration’. They did not go into the subject, but it was clear that according to them, his wife should have dealt with the frustration by ‘learning her lesson’ and then she wouldn’t have had bone cancer. Of course, that would be a very insensitive thing to say to a man who had just lost his wife. To clse down this line of reasoning, An said: ‘Never mind. Everybody has his or her own time. Your wife too’. The husband of the herbalist, enigmatically held up his hand to the stranger: ‘it’s all in here’.

The stranger looked intently at the hand. After a tense moment he said: ‘but I don’t see anything!’ Nobody cleared up his confusion. I was also confused for a second, until I realized that the husband of the herbalist probably wanted to show the lines in his hand, meaning that everybody’s time of death is already engraved at birth. But the stranger was probably expecting some ‘image’ to appear in the hand, projected there by ‘the other side’ to give him a clue to the meaning of all the things that happened in his life.

When Beth noticed he still did not understand what they were telling him, she tried again:

‘Why do babies inexplicably die in their cribs? Because that soul had to finish a lesson before going back to the Light. And the parents and grandparents of that baby also had to learn a lesson. If you understand that, everything becomes much clearer. Why did Hitler exist, why was Pim Fortuyn shot? There is always a perpetrator and a victim. Look, my son was eighteen when he died. He went on a holiday for the first time without us, with a friend. Three days after he left, a drunken driver ran him over and killed him. Well, I can tell you, you think of every possible way to avenge. I was so angry that I thought: I will send that man a postcard every single day with the message: “this postcard was sent to you by the mother of the boy you killed”. But it doesn’t work like that. Without Judas, there would not have been a Jesus. Every human was meant to be, was meant to exist and live the life he lives. That insight was the start of my spiritual development’.

* Pim Fortuyn was a populist politician who was shot in May 2002, the first Dutch politician to be killed for his political convictions since more than 200 years. His sudden popularity, his subsequent murder and the outpouring of emotions afterwards provoked a crisis in the political landscape of the Netherlands, and much debate, politicians and intellectuals asking themselves how it was possible they were so out of touch with popular sentiment.
The enigmatic man who had held up his hand earlier added in dialect: ‘a murderer comes here, and kills some people, but when he gets up there again he won’t be a killer anymore’.

After Beth’s tale of grief that certainly equalled his own, the stranger was apparently properly chastened and the talking relaxed. He told us about the messages he got from his wife through Maria Bemelmans: that she was with her family now, and very happy. Most of his life, he wasn’t interested in religion, it didn’t really go well with having his own business. But he became religious again after her death. His wife also had a gift. She could see when people only had a few more weeks to go.

At the end of the evening, when the group was breaking up, Beth couldn’t help repeating what she would often say:

‘It’s all very nice, the paranormal stuff, very spectacular, but in the end it’s about spiritual development. Whether you understand what you have to learn here on this earth in order to get ahead’.

In this story, the fundamentals are very clearly outlined and applied: people are here to learn a lesson and progress spiritually throughout the cycles of reincarnation. Everybody you meet, everything that happens, is part of a larger pattern. Other religious repertoire can be drawn on to fit into this framework. For example, the wisdom of the gospels and the resurrection of Christ are deemed very important, but do not exclude a belief in reincarnation and in other ‘masters’, who can be equal in importance to Jesus: during another session a medium transmitted messages from ‘master Morya’ to every person present. Master Morya was described as a very high ‘intelligence’ who among others had incarnated as the Moses of the Old Testament. Blavatsky also claimed to receive messages from a ‘master Morya’. According to her, he was one of the ‘masters of the Himalaya’ who helped her formulate theosophy. Supposedly, the Morya whose messages were transmitted during one of the evenings of this association and the Morya of Blavatsky are one and the same.

Within this framework, all the sources of wisdom in the world can be translated to refer to the same universal reality, which can be known and understood by developing spiritually. Of other, less inclusive religions or ideologies they would say, shaking their heads with pity, ‘they are unawakened’. Or: ‘they didn’t get there yet’; i.e. a certain level of spiritual development and insight.

3. THEMES FOR MORALIZING

As we can see in the tale of perpetrators and victims, every individual is assumed to be born with a blueprint of his destiny. This blueprint consists of the ‘lessons’ you still have to learn to be able to develop spiritually, and to progress along the hierarchy of spheres as you are born and return to the ‘other side’ again and again until you can be taken up

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41 See http://www.mayil.com/
completely into the one source of Light. Everything that you meet on your ‘path in life’ should be seen in the light of this blueprint, as a chance to learn the lessons you were born to learn. This is the basis for all ‘moralising’.

This idea leads to a very radical notion of personal responsibility: everybody has to learn his or her own lessons generated by his or her previous lives. Life is not a very gentle teacher: the death of a son, years of nuisance from a drug addict, a painful death of bone cancer. In this worldview, there is no way to go around the pain, to ease it with a sense of justified anger by assigning the blame somewhere else. Because whatever happens to you: it’s your lesson! Only you can discover what this lesson is supposed to be, and it is usually a very hard one. In this, the moralizing of the spiritual Association is very different from the emphasis on well-being and happiness that characterizes consumerist forms of New Age\(^2\). This moralizing is much more ‘other worldly’, focused on the far off goal of reuniting with the one source of Love (although some people claimed that this goal was pretty close for them, ‘only’ one or two more lives away).

The point of the heavy moralizing in all these examples is to realize that everything was ‘meant to be’, there is no good or bad, there are only lessons to be learned. That is why the enigmatic husband of the herbalist referred to the ‘murderer who is not a murderer’ when he goes to the other side: a murderer may be bad in worldly terms because of what he did, but in the greater scheme of things he simply fulfilled his purpose, enabling other people to learn their lessons.

Although this notion of personal responsibility is a direct consequence of the idea that everybody is born with a blueprint of his destiny, during the meetings of this group people did not seem very preoccupied with figuring what this blueprint told them to do. Perhaps the setting was too public to go too deeply into anyone’s personal life. Some of the regulars consulted mediums and psychics privately, becoming part of their personal ‘following’ to delve more deeply into their purpose in this life and the karma of their former lives. Others had already ‘figured it out’ and yet others, like Jacky and Jeff, were still ‘lost in translation’: the worldview underlying the practices of the meetings did not make sense to them yet on a personal level. Jacky often told me that she did not know what she was supposed to do, although she had often been told that it would soon become clear.

The notion of everybody’s own personal ‘blueprint’ and karma was often referred to to illustrate the limits of one person’s influence over another: neither punishment nor help nor teaching can do anything to make anyone ‘see the light’ and mend his ways. Like Beth told the stranger: ‘you cannot decide for him [the drug addict] what his lesson should be, you can only learn your own lesson’. This notion of personal responsibility and the limits of power of one person over another were often reinforced by the messages transmitted by the mediums, and in the lectures and workshops given

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\(^2\) For example, recently a magazine was started in the Netherland under the name ‘Happinez’, discussing topics to do with alternative spiritualities. See www.happinez.nl

123
by other practitioners such as psychics. And the best ones were very provoking in getting this message across. In the following I will give another example.

*The limits of power in personal relationships*

During the evening with the medium and psychic from Rotterdam, Diane Veer, who gave such a strong warning to the magnetist, she also gave some very clear marital advice to Monique, a young woman in the audience who I had been coming more often recently. The room was full; as always, the promise of a message from the other side had drawn a lot of new visitors. At one point, Diane said: ‘I’m getting some information about a little boy. Who has a little boy here who is being labelled too quickly?’ Monique and another woman stood up and said that they recognized this description.

Diane went on to describe him:

‘He is very sensitive, and he has trouble concentrating. He screams for attention, but he is getting mainly negative attention. That’s why he’s withdrawing into his own world. Do people doubt the intelligence of this boy?’

Again, both women recognized this description and answered yes. But Monique answered a lot louder than the other woman, pushing her claim that this message was intended for her son.

Diane went on:

‘He is very afraid to be left alone. Everything is bottled up, in his stomach. He has the tendency to be more aware of what the people around him want than what he wants himself. So he has a symbiotic relationship with his surroundings. He’s very much inside his head. He has difficulty communicating what he wants. Does he have to miss one of his parents?’

Both women answered, one saying that the father of her child was gone, Monique saying in a louder voice: ‘yes, spiritually he has to miss his father’. The quieter woman surrendered her claim with a shrug, and sat down.

Diane continued:

‘The parents are not communicating with each other. You say: “it’s the father”. But in this case I strongly have the inclination to grab both parents by the neck and bang their heads together. Because if the parents don’t communicate, the child suffers. They are busy accusing each other: “you are the one doing everything wrong!” “No, you!” That has to stop. The child is only present in the upper part of his body. His feelings are confused, because he doesn’t know if he is welcome. Partly, he has no security. So the two of you have to learn how to communicate again. Learn not to point the finger at each other, because that has the guaranteed effect of making the other person get on his hind legs again. Don’t attack! Maybe you could start [indicating
Monique], by just staying close to your own feelings. He is a rainbow child60, that’s why he is so sensitive. He needs a lot of physical exercise. And the two of you [husband and wife] have to draw closer again and communicate and create a safe surrounding for him.’

During this speech Monique was constantly interrupting Diane: ‘but my husband is not open for this kind of thing, he is just blind, doesn’t see that this is a very special child’. She practically explained her whole domestic situation, but Diane refused to confirm her view of the problem, and just talked over her interruptions. When Monique protested against the advice that they should stop fighting: ‘but he won’t stop!’ Diane had the last word by telling Monique: ‘then maybe you should be the first to stop’.

Again, there is the notion of personal responsibility, and again this is used to point out the limitations of power and influence one individual can or should have over another. The stranger is told that he cannot decide over another man’s life despite the suffering this person has caused him and his wife, Monique is told that she should not try to force her husband to ‘see’ that his son is a rainbow child, to ‘open up’, to join her in her spiritual practices, to stop fighting. In fact, she was told pretty bluntly that it was as much her fault as her husband’s that their son was not feeling well.

In studies of alternative spiritualities, it is often pointed out that they all revolve around the sacralization of the self: to connect to one’s ‘higher self’, to find one’s authentic divine self buried underneath the conditioning of a repressive society etc (e.g. Hanegraaff 1999; Harskamp 2000; Heelas 1996; Sutcliffe 1995; Wood 2003). Although there is a similar importance attached to the self in this context, there are significant differences: first of all, although theoretically the self is divine, and one can train oneself to tap into divine energies, the emphasis here is more fundamentally evolutionist: everybody has to live many more lives to be able to participate in the divine sphere of Light. Furthermore, in practice the focus is not so much on finding one’s own self or even on finding personal happiness but rather on relationships: the fact that everybody has a unique blueprint is used to warn people against trying to ‘reform’ each other, ‘save’ each other from mistakes or try to take on each other’s problems. The purpose is not to become happier, or more in touch with one’s self, but to learn and to progress spiritually and this is translated to practical relationship advice.

Nevertheless, it is true that the medium in the first moral tale told An and another woman to ‘set her own priorities’. Why should she do that if not to become happier? In fact his main message in the general explanations he gave for the rest of us, was that we should give priority to loving ourselves, giving tips on how to do this such

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60 Rainbow children are considered to be a sign that the ‘Age of Aquarius’ is here, a fundamental shift in the spiritual life of the world that will lead to a more peaceful and spiritually advanced civilisation (the New Age). Rainbow children are considered to be more sensitive and paranormal perceptive, and their aura is not dominated by one or two colours, as with most people, but by all the colours of the chakras.
as putting your hands on your stomach before going to sleep. The idea behind this is that by loving yourself, and striving to develop spiritually, you will ultimately be able to ‘raise’ the love level around you, more than when you are over-concerned with the suffering of other people. This is echoed in the advice another medium gave a few times during a séance, also mostly to women: don’t suffer along with other people when they are having a hard time, it’s enough to be sympathetic (meeleven, niet meelijken).

In a different way, this addresses again the limitations of the power and influence an individual can have over other people. In the examples of the stranger and Monique with her son, the situation was one of conflict, one person wanting to interfere with another person’s life because they believed that the problem lay there. In the advice against over caring and suffering along, the situation was one where these women take on too much of the burdens of other people, worry too much about their near and dear ones. They were told that no amount of worrying and caring can prevent the people around them from making their own choices and making their own mistakes.

Seen within the context of the south of Limburg, this emphasis on the self is still very far from an individualist emphasis on personal development and happiness. The pre-Vatican II Catholic church strongly encouraged women to sacrifice their own well being for the well being of their family, never showing fatigue or chagrin, to be the ‘angel in the home’. In fact, birth control was seen as ‘selfish’, putting the pleasure of husband and wife before their duty to obey God’s will. This ethos is still very much embodied by women in Limburg. As I described in the previous chapter, a good Limburg woman is a very busy person but she should be busy for others, not busy making her personal career.

Here, women who were accustomed to seeing themselves in terms of service to others were introduced to a subtle underlying evaluation of this kind of behaviour: that they were in fact ‘over caring’. They were told that caring is a way to ‘bind’ people to them, that they were relying on gratitude and the sense of being needed to reinforce their own sense of self-worth. The resistance of the woman in the first moral tale when the medium told her that she should not expect gratitude would probably be interpreted by him as a sign that she was ‘not ready’ to see that she was actually relying on other people to confirm her sense of self-worth. The ideal he was trying to transmit to her was that she should be confident enough of herself and her path in life to give her love freely, without expecting gratitude in return.

In this view, the quality and intensity of your reactions to other people will tell you ‘where you stand’ in your spiritual development. So instead of blaming them for causing you to be angry or to suffer, you have to thank them for the opportunity they provide for you to learn a lesson. This should be the ‘official’ indicator. Unofficially, however, the indicator for spiritual development was paranormal abilities. Although Beth and the mediums and psychics that visited this Association discouraged the idea, people often assumed a direct link between paranormal gifts and spiritual development. When they encouraged each other to develop spiritually, they often meant that they should be open to paranormal experiences: pay attention to their dreams, strange
impression and coincidences, fleeting thoughts that might turn out to be predictions or messages from the other side.

4. Power, Affectons and Gossip

Although people took a lot of liberty interfering in each other’s private lives, this was counteracted by the freedom to ignore the strong advice and interference. Even the ‘experts’ such as the mediums did not have the last word because there was no way that people could be sanctioned for not following their interpretations and advice. Furthermore, although they control a rare resource (contact with the ‘other side’, paranormal perception), their authority in spiritual matters was far from absolute. In the discussions after the main event of these meetings and the general gossip about mediums and psychics it was often affirmed that although they can ‘transmit’ messages from a supposedly factual ‘other side’, the content of these messages can always be dismissed as ‘coming from a lower sphere’. Just like the ‘other side’ consists of several spheres, each more pure than the other, people constructed hierarchies among the different mediums depending on which sphere they were supposed to be in contact with.

Because the central beliefs were nowhere clearly outlined, it was considered normal for people to take a while to assimilate them, and it might take even longer before they became rooted in their personal experience of life. Power was dispersed among practitioners.

But power and the abuse of power was a very important issue, as we can see in the first moral tale of this chapter. Practitioners are often suspected of making people dependent on them and even of actually using the energy of their ‘patients’ to feed their own energy. For example, some practitioners think that Jomanda has a whole network of energy she can draw on, she gives every visitor to her healings a little card, which she has ‘charged’ with healing energy. In fact, some people speculate, it is the other way around: via these cards, she can ‘suck up’ people’s energy for her own use. People who do this are often likened to vacuum cleaners or vampires.

Socialising

Nevertheless, the atmosphere among ‘visitors’ of these evenings was very relaxed. Nobody expected anybody else to be a true ‘believer’. ‘Bookish’ knowledge was not respected very much, rather personal experience was supposed to be the foundation of insight and spiritual growth. Gossip was indulged in freely and humourously. Confusion was freely admitted by many of the members, such as Jacky, An and Jeff. As we saw, Jeff was determined to remain sceptical. He did not believe any of it, because he did not ‘feel’ anything. He could not understand how it was possible that everybody was talking about things that he could just not perceive at all. Jacky also told me often she did not ‘feel’ anything, but she was a little less sceptical. She had been a member for years, like Jeff. An was non-committal and close-lipped. I had the impression that she
had someone else that she trusted to talk things over with. Even Beth, who had the most
authority, always emphasized that she was not really paranormally gifted.

These people kept coming back because they liked the atmosphere and
friendship of these evenings, the thrill of perhaps suddenly gaining a life changing
insight, the opportunity to talk about spiritual things with other people. Sometimes, the
social aspect of getting together and sharing dominated the evening sessions more than
the desire to learn anything new. In some cases, this meant that the actual words spoken
did not make much sense. One such event was the slideshow of Pete, who had recently
lost his wife.

It was a ‘closed evening’, an evening when members supposedly got together to
work on their own skills and train each other. The evening started with the slide show
by Pete. The slides showed how he went to his wife’s grave to bring a flower
arrangement he made. He had taken pictures of the flower-arrangement, of the
graveyard and the grave of his wife, of women cleaning the graves, of the Jewish section
of the cemetery, and the various crosses and statues depicting saints. With every picture
he gave a ‘symbolical interpretation’; as he termed it. His way of talking was staccato:
image after image, each with its own symbolic meaning.

He started the story with how he looked out of the window before going to the
grave, and saw a cat stalking a bird. ‘My first thought was: “stay away from that bird!”’
But, that’s part of life. Death is part of it’. Then he showed the slide with the flower
arrangement, next to a picture of his wife. Every part of the flower arrangement was
‘symbolic’: the quirky shape of the branch with blossoms represented the unexpected
twists and turns of life, the blossoms themselves for all the good things that came out of
it after all. The two leaves symbolized his wife and him, the two flowers their children.
The black stones represented the sadness and grief when she died, the white stones the
insight that it may still be possible to go on.

And so he went on: a statue of Jesus with his hand broken off was symbolic for
the ‘fact’ that he had taken away his blessing from this world. He showed a cross
without corpus and explained that it is not necessary to have a corpus on it, because it
has vines and Jesus said: you are as the vines of the grape. So, symbolically, the vines
already represent him. He pointed out the chubby head of a cherub hovering around the
top of the cross: ‘we’ll just have to wait and see if we’ll become a nice little angel like
him’. He also showed the graves of the rich: “‘the upper ten’, so to speak, but of course
whether they will be so privileged in heaven as they were on earth is an open question’.

Since the evening was intended to train each other, I was trying to make out the
central message or teaching in Pete’s slideshow, but I failed to make sense of this
‘symbolic journey’. The images and their ‘symbolic meaning’ did not seem to add up to
one coherent vision or storyline. It seemed to me I could hear the voice of various
different persons responding to Pete’s situation: the voice of a pastor suggesting that
despite his grief, did he not see a little light in his life, the possibility that he might go
on? The voices of people trying to console him with his loss by saying the usual. Perhaps

128
also the voice of a priest he might have met while going to the cemetery, telling about
the vines and the absence of the corpus, joking about the statue of Jesus with his hand
broken off. Plus some very standard clichés that I had heard many times from the older
generation, expressing the sense of self-righteousness of ‘poor’ and ‘simple’ Catholics.
The message of these clichés was always the same: the rich and the powerful may seem
high and mighty now, but will they still be like that in heaven? A priest may act grandly
now, but even he doesn’t know whether he will be taken up into heaven and become a
‘nice little angel’. There will be justice in the end, it won’t matter that we have just been
‘little people’ all our lives.

These clichés seemed out of place in this context, they belonged to another
framework of thinking and they introduced a theme that Pete did not elaborate on: in
heaven, every injustice will be righted, ‘the first will be the last’. That is very different
from the evolution of reincarnations usually assumed here, which emphasizes the need
to develop spiritually.

After he finished, people seemed to be uncertain about how to react, but then
Jacky started applauding, and the rest followed suit. Beth complimented him for his
courage to show this to us, and the way he was dealing with his grief. After this warm
reception, he spoke in a more natural voice: ‘I think a lot about the meaning of life when
I’m at the graveyard. And you notice something different every time you’re there. In the
beginning [when his wife just died], you’re angry. You think: I always did my best, why
does this happen to me? You think: God has pulled a trick on me. But then you really
start thinking. Sometimes it’s better, sometimes it’s worse’. Beth: ‘yes, that’s life, it’s like
the tides, it’s ebb and flow’.

Looking back, I would say that by starting to applaud, and by ending with yet
another cliché pronounced by the unofficial leader, the group successfully transformed
an unusual and confusing performance into a heart-warming moment of recognition
and acceptance for Pete. On the level of what was actually being said, confusion
remained. But apparently, they were able to take this confusing ‘symbolic journey’ for
what it was: one man’s individual struggle to come to terms with the death of his wife.

The informal character of these gatherings was very important also to relativize
the doctrines espoused in this setting. Gossip, as an expression of informality and means
of social control thrived in this association. Below, I examine the role of gossip in more
detail.

_Gossip, objectivity and subjectivity_

Because of the literal way of thinking about things spiritual, pronouncements by
mediums and psychics tend to have an air of finality and absoluteness especially to
inexperienced ‘seekers’. The assumption, and their pretension, is that they transmit
‘objective information’ that can also be accessed by others just like a scientist assumes
that his data can be confirmed by other scientists using the same research techniques.
In practice however, the accurateness and objectivity of the personal messages and advice transmitted is considered prejudiced by the subjectivity of the medium or psychic. Gaining experience in this scene means that one can distinguish between the different ‘qualities’ of information.

Gossip is therefore a very important tool. The subject of how to separate the badly intentioned and power crazy mediums from the ‘good’ mediums is an all time favourite. As I described above, it was actually the first topic to come up when I contacted Beth. It was also the subject of the advice given to Matt. And when a medium, or an informed layman, wanted to describe somebody as an amateur, they would accuse him of contacting ‘malicious spirits’ rather than ‘the other side’. This was of course a very serious accusation, which I have never heard anyone make face to face with the person concerned. This is, as it were, the last resort to disqualify a person.

This assumption that ‘the other side’ is an objective reality means that ‘moral guidance’ is seen as something that is not relative, and theoretically, can be ‘accessed’ in a pure form through contact with ‘the other side’. But the notions of subjectivity and personal responsibility softened the objective reality of ‘the other side’ and the moral advice transmitted. Each person can only perceive the ‘objective reality’ of the other side according to his own level of spiritual development, and there is no right and wrong, there are only lessons to learn. It is exactly this tendency to present slightly judgmental but presumably ‘objective’ personality descriptions that is the ‘selling point’ of this kind of alternative spirituality, continuously attracting the curious and the lost. I will return to this subject below, continuing the discussion I began at the end of the chapter 4. But first, I want to show how much people actually care that these beliefs should be taken literally.

5. WAYS OF BELIEVING

In Hanegraaff’s classification, the beliefs outlined here should be seen as the more extreme form of occultism. However, in present day characterizations of New Age, the impression dominates that these beliefs are becoming more and more abstract and psychological. In his inaugural lecture, Hanegraaff himself even signals the ‘end of the hermetic tradition’ (The title of his inaugural lecture Hanegraaff 2000). Ramstedt also shows that in modern paganism, another offshoot of alternative spirituality, it is often hard to distinguish between the literal ‘invocation’ or the metaphorical play of symbols that characterizes fantasy, and that people often do not really care to distinguish between the two (Ramstedt forthcoming 2007).

In the descriptive parts of this chapter, it becomes clear that a literal interpretation of cosmologies and all the beings that are associated with these cosmologies dominates, and that people do care that the ‘real’ existence of spirits, ‘the other side’ and paranormal phenomena in general should not be left unresolved. And this has clear implications for the way in which people orient themselves morally. Although moralizing was common, it was only in extreme cases that the fundamental ideas were outlined. Rather than on basic beliefs and their moral implications, the
emphasis was on ‘evidence’, which would somehow ‘automatically’ translate into a moral guideline. Morality, via a very particular epistemology, can be deduced from ontology: there is definitely something ‘out there’, outside the self that sets the standards.

Although this seems very absolute on an intellectual level, most people who frequented the evenings of Spiritual Association of the Hills shared a very practical attitude whatever they believed. A particular practice either works or it does not work, it gives you more insight or it does not, and if it does not you continue looking until you find something that works. A sceptical attitude was very common, even among the people who came there more often. Although among practitioners and some regulars the existence of ‘the other side’ was an uncontroversial fact, they were still critical: does this medium really communicate with ‘the other side’ or does he just really want to, is he overrating himself? And even if he is not making it up, is he not too ‘subjective’ in his transmission? Does he know how to distinguish his own thoughts from the messages he receives? Mediums, after all, are only human.

Unlike the highly ‘metaphorical’ and abstract religiosity of the pastoral centre discussed in the next chapter, in the Spiritual Association of the Hills the existence of the other side was seen as a fact that can be proven. Practitioners took for granted that the visitors on the open nights, and their ‘clients’ on the paranormal markets or in their private practice, would be sceptical. They were tolerant of scepticism, they accepted that they had something to prove and often talked among themselves about strategies for convincing sceptics.

Of course, to other believers and practitioners, and often to their clients as well, they would express the opinion that the sceptic ‘in his heart’ knew that what they were saying was no joke, and one day would be able to ‘open up’ to this knowledge. If someone did not accept their pronouncements they would speculate that this was due to a blocked chakra, cutting him off from awareness of a greater reality. It was simply a stage in their spiritual evolution.

So when there was talk of spirits, ghosts, guides and angels, this was intended literally. Even ‘symbols’ were not symbolic in the way people usually mean the term in everyday language, or the way the widower relating his ‘symbolic journey’ meant it. In the first moral tale of this chapter, I ended with the discussion between Jeff and Linda about the issue whether it is allowed to ‘put a symbol in a room’ without asking the people present for permission. Linda was the one who raised this issue. She ‘saw’ this symbol when she entered a room, although the others did not see it. This symbol was not visible to normal eyes but only visible psychically, because it consisted of energy. Although the other people didn’t see it, if another paranormally trained person would have been there, she would also have been able to see it. The underlying assumption therefore, is that the result of the act of ‘putting a symbol in the room’ can be perceived as an objective reality by someone attuned to the right ‘frequencies’ of energy, even if he or she did not see the act itself happen. The act produces an objective ‘reality’, remaining
present after the act. So when somebody claims to have ‘put a symbol in the room’ one should take this literally and definitely not metaphorically.

This literalism became particularly clear during one evening, when the son of Beth’s husband gave a lecture on pyramids. He spent most of the time explaining what kind of research had been done on these pyramids, what myths surround them, but emphasized that from a scientific point of view the puzzle of how they were built was still unsolved and one could not know whether these myths were true. He refused to commit himself to any (natural or supernatural) explanation of how the pyramids were built, leaving the question open.

This made the audience restless. In the questions they asked him, it became clear that they wanted certainty: what did he ‘really’ think, were the pyramids built by extraterrestrials, by slave labour or by the people of Atlantis? And were the people of Atlantis ‘actually’ the same extraterrestrials who might have built the pyramids? And didn’t all the evidence point to the fact that these pyramids couldn’t have been built without some kind of supernatural powers? Hadn’t he said himself that people use only a fraction of their brainpower? Who knows what other kinds of powers people used to have, that we could learn to have?

When the speaker still did not want to commit himself to any certainties, people started supplying each other with information, giving references to books and talking about instruments that could ‘measure’ the energy frequencies in the pyramids and of the objects placed under a pyramid and how these corresponded to the frequencies of significant numbers and measurements. On this subject, the lecturer was prepared to be more authoritative because he had a business selling pyramid frames, which could be used for ‘charging’ objects, food and water for beneficial health effects. He also recommended sleeping under a pyramid. According to him, someone had actually patented the concept of using a pyramid to keep razor blades sharp. However, he still maintained that ‘scientifically’, people had no idea how this worked.

But it was clear that the people in the audience were all convinced that there was a machine that could scientifically measure the frequencies of pyramids that would explain their miraculous powers, that a machine like this would be able to provide ‘factual knowledge’ on the relative spiritual frequencies of other objects and people. When I started doing a private course in Tarot with a lady in Welden, she commented on the occasion when we first met: during the lecture of this ‘stupid person’ who refused to see the evidence right in front of his eyes because of his limited spiritual development.

This literal and practical way of ‘believing’ and thinking, induced by the strong emphasis on causality and the continuity between this world and ‘the other side’, can be characterized as metonymical. By metonymical I mean that people do not use a symbolic language to refer to a far off divine reality (using part of this domain metaphorically to point to another domain), but that they assume that the things they talk about are actually present, or can be contacted in some way (see also Poeve 1989). A metonymia
does not point to another reality, like a metaphor does, but is literally ‘of the same stuff’ as this other reality.

Ways of believing, ways of moralising and ‘buying your freedom’

What does this ‘literal’ way of believing mean in a wider context? And how does it fit into the trend to ‘consume’ religion? In chapter 4, I already argued that it is exactly the promise of access to special knowledge coming from some source available only to people with ‘special powers’ that sells at the paranormal markets. Perhaps it is true that theoretically, this source is considered to be ‘inside’ everybody as well, but in practice, people buy these goods and services because they want knowledge from ‘outside’ themselves. On the other hand, this knowledge from ‘outside’ oneself is ‘domesticated’, because it is obtained through the loose and arbitrary relationship between buyers and sellers.

Potentially, every buyer is free to do with the information what he wants, to interpret it whichever way he wants. The relationship between buyers and sellers as we can see them on the paranormal markets are not necessarily embedded in a community of believers that will reinforce each other’s beliefs and have forms of social control to regulate interpretations. As I have argued, ‘consuming religion’ by reading a book or going to a paranormal market and making use of the services there, is a way of ‘buying your freedom’.

But as I have also pointed out in the previous chapter, the circulations of gifts and books associated with alternative spiritualities such as spiritualism and New Age means that these ideas become part of the narratives people create with each other and for each other. A section of this market of books and goods is characterized by the basic ideas and literalist way of believing described in this chapter. The question is then, how the ‘moral content’ of commoditized forms of religion are used and transmitted. Something of an answer suggests itself by taking a closer look at the relationship between buyer and seller at the paranormal markets.

Below, I focus on a very popular ‘commodity’ at the paranormal markets: the services offered by aura-readers. I will show that within the interaction between buyer and seller, if the interaction is successful, new inter-subjective realities are created that are also strongly moralizing and can shape the way people orient themselves morally in far-reaching ways.

To do research at the paranormal markets, I talked informally to other visitors there, attended the free lectures and took myself as a guinea pig, doing ‘consults’ to see how it works. I avoided the people who claimed to be able to contact my guides on the other side. In the Spiritual Association, a few times mediums told me my grandmother was with me, or gave a message from her and this came emotionally too close for me. So I let my palm be read, and my aura photographed, and lingered around the table when other people were doing the same.
Usually, the interpreter of an aura photograph or a palm reader will make some general statements about the person, then ask a question to confirm whether the customer recognizes this or not. Sometimes the customer will react spontaneously to the descriptions. Then the interpreter will proceed with some additional description, concluding with some statements about the way to proceed, and in some cases more practical advice. All statements are implicitly and explicitly linked to a person's biography and spiritual development.

I found that all these service providers had very different ways of convincing their customers and different rates of success as well. One man was particularly convincing, and there was always a long line at his stall, whatever paranormal market I went to. At this stall, you could take aura pictures and ask the man attending to interpret this picture. In my case he said something like: you are a very open person, and you are learning to be more goal-oriented. He said he deduced this from the colour red in my aura. For a woman, that was good, for men it meant they were too goal-oriented, too strategic in their thinking. They should have blue in their aura, indicating openness in communication. Then he said that in dealing with people, I was always very respectful of their views, holding my own views and their views in equal balance. He deduced this from a slightly purplish colour just above my head. According to him, that was very good, and meant I was spiritually more advanced than the girl who was sitting there before me, who also had a red aura.

The girl and I looked at each other with a sort of ironic expression: not a very tactful guy! He said that in future my aura should become green, the colour of the heart chakra, uniting the red and the purple (the red is connected to the lower chakra, the one the medium in the opening story was referring to, and the purple colour is connected to the highest chakra, on the crown). Right now, something was still blocking my heart chakra. During this explanation he looked at my face and used the expressions on it to illustrate his point about the way I dealt with people, and wove the colour of the sweater I was wearing into his prediction that my aura would become green when I developed. The colour of my sweater was green, but this particular kind of green was a little bit too hard, according to him, indicating I wanted to be ‘separate’. It made him think I was not from Limburg, but from the big cities in the North.

Of course, predictions like this make people curious whether their level of personal development, in this case as inferred from their aura, will in fact have progressed later or. So half a year later, they will go again, to see what happened in the meantime. I went two years later, in another city, just before starting on this chapter, to sniff the atmosphere again and remind myself of how it works. And yes, the main colour in my aura was now a soft green. This time, it was a lady who interpreted my picture. According to her, green was the colour of the heart and healing and forgiveness, and it meant that I was giving all this to people and would be getting it in return. There was also a big yellow cloud over my head this time, and this made her admonish me very strongly not to think too much about the future.
Certain values were referred to explicitly in this interaction: love, forgiveness, spiritual development, respect. But negative judgments were also passed: my heart chakra was still closed, I should not think to much about the future, the other girl was not very spiritually advanced. His descriptions linked up with general cultural stereotypes about men and women: men are goal oriented; women are oriented towards communication, interpersonal relationships. Although this was not the case with me, at the Spiritual Association people often brought their own aura pictures to discuss and point out little points of light in their auras that were supposed to be their spiritual guides, or a deceased relative.

Even though the customer can simply shrug it off, and walk away without any obligations to take these evaluations and judgements seriously, usually something has been established in the interaction that makes this difficult. First, curiosity has been aroused: is there a way that I can know more about myself? Do I have a spiritual guide in my aura? Then, some nerve has been touched somewhere. The descriptions are very general, and mostly positive, so it is unusual for people to immediately say ‘it’s not true’. When somebody is told that his crown chakra is very open to the spiritual world, he will be flattered before wondering whether he actually believes in spiritual connections. And of course, when something bad happens in one’s personal biography, or in relationships with other people, the ‘negative’ pronouncements will come back and be seen in another light, turned around to see whether they fit or explain the situation etc.. Even in my case, they stuck in my mind somewhere, and would periodically pop up again, even though I had resolved not to apply them to myself.

In short, it is not only the promise of messages from the other side, from a source of knowledge outside the self that ‘sells’, it is also the judgments passed and the perspective offered (of becoming a better person) that make people come back, for confirmation or for orientation. Moreover, these judgments and perspectives are presented as facts with all the trappings of facts: pictures, graphs, and machines to measure things… The easiest way to ‘shrug them off’ would be a stance of total disbelief with regard to the underlying worldview. However, this worldview is usually not explicated, the ‘customer’ is not asked to agree with the existence of ‘beings of light’ or spheres or angels, he is just asked to recognize or not recognize a description of himself. In the statistical research about worldview in the Netherlands it is obvious that most people are open to the notion that there is ‘more’ between heaven and earth and the percentage of people believing in reincarnation and other concepts connected to alternative spiritualities is rising (Dekker 1997:16-20). Even a slight openness to the possibility that the descriptions offered are ‘true’, means that other possibilities of ‘gaining insight’ to further justify or edify oneself, whether from the free astrology pages, or, in especially difficult times, paid services will be attractive. And this means that the ‘products’ connected with alternative spiritualities, in their various forms have a big potential market, of which at least a section is dominated by the moral orientations and ways of believing described here.
6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter I have given an in-depth ethnographic description of a phenomenon that is often discussed, but in my opinion often insufficiently described. As others have also pointed out, much of the literature on alternative spiritualities relies on the books and other materials written by self-proclaimed leaders (Wood 2003). Here we can see that a vibrant interpretative community is created with the help of repertoires of alternative spirituality where the leader did not want to proclaim herself as such (Beth), the books written were not published (Beth’s husband), and people did not read the books they cited (Blavatsky).

This description contradicts the general impression of alternative spiritualities in a number of ways. The focus in this context is much more on suffering and life after death, and the visitors do not fit the usual stereotype of highly educated, left-leaning women. The characteristics I found here are not confined to the Association where I did my fieldwork, but are also reflected in the other spiritual associations I know of, the paranormal markets, and the phenomenon of Jomanda. Together, they create a much more informal and invisible, less well-verbalized sub-repertoire of beliefs and practices circulating within the larger network of alternative spiritualities.

However, it is my impression that the ideas and concepts described here, especially the literalism, are common to a large part of the public that buys products associated with alternative spiritualities. For people without scientific training, the emphasis on science can be very persuasive (and those people are in the majority). For those with scientific training, a relativist worldview would be more attractive (and those are the people who study religion). More research is needed, but it indicates that differences in educational background and class do have an impact. However, researchers will have to overcome their tendency to stick to a guided tour of the scene by someone of their own educational background, who knows how to glide effortlessly from a literalist explanation to a psychologized version of the same worldview. Instead, they should try to immerse themselves more through participant observation.

In chapter 4 and in this chapter I have also argued, contrary to the general literature, that even in settings where individuals are told that their ‘self’ is sacred, knowledge from ‘sacred sources’ is solicited from outside the self. Rather than reflecting a ‘celebration of the self’, the emphasis on the self and the authority ascribed to it reflects the ambivalent nature of the relationship of individuals to institutions and institutionalized knowledge in general. In Limburg, this ambivalent relationship is especially strong: the Catholic Church always characterized ‘religious knowledge’ as inaccessible to lay people, and created a concept of the sacred as a separate domain somehow far away from life here on earth, guarded by special gatekeepers.

As I argued in chapter 4, the trend is to ‘familiarize’ and domesticate authority, not to do away with it altogether. In alternative spiritualities in general and in this scene in particular, the advice is always that it (authority, knowledge, interference from people embodying both) should ‘feel right’, otherwise you should just ignore it. And of course,
this can be interpreted as a part of the Romantic heritage and a reaction to the
dominance of science in Dutch society: a longing for ‘the facts’ to connect to experience
again.

However, contrary to the general consensus about alternative spiritualities and
present-day culture in general, this emphasis on the self does not exclude the possibility
of accepting an authority outside oneself. Although people ‘buy’ their knowledge and
therefore their freedom, there is a strongly evaluative flavour to the ‘knowledge’ offered
that makes it hard to ignore, backed by an authority that bundles the awe inspired by
religion, with the awe inspired by scientific knowledge. However, this moralizing is
very different from the moralizing by a priest: there is no one to oblige you to believe,
there is no community of believers from which you can be expelled. It is also different
from the moralizing of the doctor who tells you to stop smoking because it is bad for
your health: it is embedded within a framework of spiritual development, progression
towards the light, a utopian vision of ultimate love. Ultimately, ‘meaning’ ‘fact’ and
‘experience’ should become one again, the desire of every romanticist: objective reality
and subjective reality jibe instead of being at war with each other. By framing embodied
experience as a site for ‘fact-finding’, the disenchancing effect of science is neutralized.

When we think of ‘religion’ we tend to measure its significance in terms of
membership, or other ways in which people identify with a particular religious
tradition, movement, denomination or sect (Becker, Hart et al., 1997:57). However, when
alternative spiritualities have become part of consumer culture and therapy culture to
the extent that they are now, involvement is not an issue anymore. The injunction that it
should ‘feel right’ is part of common sense already. Facts and information presented by
people and institutions claiming authority should jibe with personal experience. If they
do not, they are kept outside the familiar.

This ‘emancipation of the familiar’ vis a vis religious authority (and perhaps also
scientific authority although that is not the subject of this book) is related to, but not the
same, as the strong emphasis on the self in alternative spiritualities on the level of
discourse. Rather, the emancipation of the familiar, expressed in behaviours such as
‘consuming religion’, refers to the social and cultural process by which relations to
religious and moral authorities are restructured.

This means that rather than characterising the degree of involvement, the study
of present-day religiosity should look at the way objects and services associated with
repertoires of alternative spirituality and their attendant ‘messages’ in terms of attitudes
and moralising become a normal part of the interactions taking place within the life
world, and within the world of business and institutions. It is no longer enough to say
that people are so syncretistic nowadays, that they make their own private religions. The
basic ideas of alternative spiritualities have a common internal logic, common moral
attitudes and a common moral orientation, which commoditized religiosity introduces
into more and more areas of life.
CHAPTER 6: THE CHRISTIAN PASTORAL CENTRE

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the discourse of a pastoral centre which is located near Welden, the way this centre is part of the local religious landscape and how lay believers develop this discourse. This pastoral centre is linked to a congregation: some of the pastors are members of this congregation and are consecrated priests; others are hired by a separate foundation and include women pastors. When I started my fieldwork, contacting key informants in Welden, I was often referred to this centre as an example of ‘modern Catholicism’ that I should investigate. In their eyes, it would be better suited to my research than taking only the local parish as my subject, because this parish was dominated by one of ‘Gijzen’s priests’. This would make my impression of Catholicism in Limburg too one-sided.

The relationship between the pastoral centre and the parish priest of Welden had long been problematic. The pastoral centre and its staff were involved in much of the renewal within Catholicism that Gijzen and his priests abhorred. During Gijzen’s reign their position was marginalized and relations between ‘Gijzen’s priests’ and representatives of progressive Catholics such as the pastoral centre were practically non-existent (Wijnen and Koopmanschap 1981:29-36). At the time of my fieldwork however, the diocese was trying to break through this polarization and involved the pastoral centre and its staff in the process of clustering local parishes and training parish volunteers (necessary because of the shortage of priests). Other research in the Netherlands as well shows how the practice of local parishes is often dominated and inspired by the ‘unofficial’ discourse of progressive Catholicism rather than the ‘official’ policy and discourse of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands (Watling 2001).

Some of these laypersons had no prior training at all; others were already familiar with the discourse of progressive Catholicism dominant in the centre. Most of the participants, especially those who had had no prior training, were primarily motivated by a desire to do something for their local community and parish church. Their ‘religious’ motivation could not be separated from this desire. In many cases the religious aspect of their motivation was hardly articulated.

The discussion groups were mixed as well: some people had been coming to the centre for years, others joined recently. Most were from the neighbouring parishes or even (though rarely) from the nearby cities. The regular discussion groups centred on reading and interpreting the Bible. Around Easter and around special issues, ad hoc groups were sometimes created. The interest of the members of the discussion groups was usually more purely ‘religious’ or spiritual. The ‘long time’ members were often quite articulate in the discourse of the pastoral centre.

Through attending these meetings, I became familiar with the discourse of the pastoral centre and the intricacies of its reasoning. In this chapter, I describe this discourse and interpret it, but I also focus on the way the participants reacted to this
discourse. It is important to note that I do not primarily interpret this discourse as a theological development within Catholicism, but much more as a part of the religious landscape in Limburg, interacting with the specific history of the church in Limburg. The reader should not expect a theologically sophisticated account of progressive Catholicism. Rather, as the rest of this book attempts to do, it focuses on how a particular discourse is presented to the participants and what this discourse is ‘made to mean’ in the actual socio-cultural setting where I came to know it, including its moral dimension.

Although ‘moralizing’ is mostly used as a ‘bad word’ by the pastors and the people attending the courses and discussion groups, referring to the heavy-handed religious regime of the past, the teaching methods of the centre can be seen as a continuous exercise in moral orientation, cutting away extraneous concerns to get to the ‘core’ of things and rediscover the central values exemplified by Jesus to be able to orient oneself in contemporary life situations.

The discourse of the centre is based on a historical-critical reading of the Bible to ‘extract’ the message of God’s love that Jesus showed in his actions and pronouncements. The pastors all cited the influential scholar Schillebeeckx as their most basic source of inspiration. In this approach, the Old Testament is interpreted as a collection of stories of a people about the history of their relationship with God. Since all the protagonists are human, and their understanding fallible, no ‘laws’ and rules can be deduced from these texts. Rather, they should inspire an orientation towards certain core values that have to be reinterpreted anew in every time and place. What they show is people trying to make sense of their situation and their life in light of their understanding and experience of what God wants. The emphasis is on the moments of ‘grace’ in these stories, such as when miracles convey God’s love for his people. These miracles are interpreted symbolically, as an indication of the impact they had on people at the time.

This is very different from the Catholicism with which many people of the older generation grew up, described in chapters 2 and 3, which emphasized certainties, moral laws deduced from a divine and unchanging ontological ‘order’ enforced by the ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ guarding the gates to a clean conscience and ultimately, heaven.

In terms of the classification of present-day religiosity developed by Heelas and Woodhead (Woodhead and Heelas 2000), the discourse of the center would fall in the

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44 Schillebeeckx is a Dominican priest, originally Belgian, but based in Nijmegen, the Netherlands since 1958. He studied with the French representatives of the ‘nouvelle théologie’ that influenced the ‘spiritual liberators’ to criticize the repressiveness of Dutch Catholicism in the 50ies. Schillebeeckx was a visiør to the Dutch bishops during the Second Vatican Council. He came in conflict with Rome because (among other things) he did not subscribe to the view that Jesus had risen ‘bodily’ from the grave or that he is ‘bodily’ present in the Eucharist.
category of ‘religions of humanity’, whereas ‘traditional Catholicism’ enforced by the
clerocracy of Limburg would fall into the opposing category of ‘religions of difference’.
The worldview endorsed at the centre and the contrast with traditional Catholicism
matches their description point by point:

‘Whereas religions of difference exalt the divine over the human, religions of
humanity shift the locus of authority from transcendent to human. Whilst the
human is not as closely identified with the divine as it is in spiritualities of
life, God and humanity are nevertheless brought into closer ontological and
epistemological relationship with one another than in religions of difference.
Rather than being viewed as awesome, fearful, and set-apart, the deity is seen
as much more approachable, tolerant, compassionate. The human is like the
divine, an image of the divine, it can even participate in the divine. Indeed,
many religions of humanity insist that it is only by starting with the human
human and experience that one can come to know something of God’
(Woodheac and Heelas 2000:70).

In section 2 of this chapter, I show how the discourse of the pastoral centre was
conveyed during one of the courses, training women from several different parishes to
make family-services. In a subsection, I also show how this discourse works in the
confrontation with someone who identifies himself as a ‘casualty’ of the radical changes
in the religious landscape in Limburg. The third and fourth sections situate the discourse
of the centre in the local religious landscape, highlighting in more detail ‘the burden of
the past’ and the ‘problem of the present’ (polarization), how this was brought up by the
participants and how this was dealt with by the pastors. Section 5 highlights some of the
most important values of the discourse of the centre and how they connected to the
attitudes and expectations of the participants. In the last part of the chapter, I focus on
the contrast between the ‘taboo’ on moralizing within the carefully non-judgmental
atmosphere enforced by the pastors, and the moralizing of informal interaction of
gossiping and stereotyping to create a warm ‘we-feeling’.

Methodological notes

As part of my fieldwork, I participated in several courses and discussion groups, and
interviewed the pastors. The courses I participated in involved training lay persons from
the surrounding parishes to make family services, wake services for the bereft held the
night before burial, and to help in the pastorate for elderly people. The courses were
either commissioned by the diocese or by a cluster of parishes cooperating to pool
resources.

Although I had access to all these courses and discussion groups for observation,
it was hard to really do ‘participant’ observation. In most cases, my role was confined to
taking notes during the discussion. In rare cases, I would join the discussion.
Participation was made more difficult because of the more formalized character of the
meetings and the fact that everything centred on talking (which meant, of course, that I
wanted to write it all down). Everybody knew I was a researcher and why I was taking
notes. They did not really expect me to join their discussion, because my motivation to be there was considered to be completely different from theirs. In the context of the courses and discussion groups the fact that I was young, not involved in parish life, and had a different background and an ‘urban smell’ automatically put me outside the group in the informal level. This was in stark contrast with the Spiritual Association, where I was easily (if a bit mistakenly) included as a ‘searcher’ rather than as a researcher.

In the informal interactions with volunteers and supporting staff, I also remained an outsider. Although everybody was friendly, they knew each other for a long time and spoke in dialect among each other, which automatically excluded me. Although I could understand it, I could not speak it and this put me automatically in the domain of the unfamiliar, the people from ‘above the river’. Here also, a difference in background and experience, and of course age, played a role. Furthermore, as I explained in chapter 1, I felt uncomfortable because I was not a Catholic and I did not want to be a Catholic, although the worldview and moral orientations elaborated here came very close to my own. But because everybody was so nice and inclusive, I was afraid to offend by excluding myself.

Another discomfort, mainly in writing this chapter, was the fact that anonymity was very important. Although relations with the diocese were improving, the bishop should be kept ‘officially unaware’ of some of the things that take place at the pastoral centre and some of the discussions, just like the neoconservative priest said that he did not want to know if someone had died of euthanasia. That is the reason why I do not refer to the pastors individually. Although there were significant differences in personal style among the pastors, they all represented more or less the same discourse and they had more or less the same teaching techniques and ways of handling group processes. As far as the descriptions of events in the discussion groups and courses go, there is no great loss in ‘homogenising’ the voice of the pastors.

In the end, these discomforts did not really hurt my research very much. For this chapter I had a wealth of data to draw on. As in the other chapters, I will include some detailed descriptions of the interactions and discussions that took place, combined with more general interpretations and observations.

2. THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

In the following section I will give a description of one session of one of the courses to give an impression of how the discourse is presented, how the participation of the groups is solicited and managed and how texts are used as a teaching tool. I chose to describe this session mainly because it discusses one of the most important themes of Christianity: the resurrection of Christ.

Interpretations of the Bible were never presented as ‘strict’ or exclusive, and always relied on the input of the participants. Nevertheless, the pastors were meticulous in guiding the participants how to interpret the stories of the Bible line by line, discussing the role and psychology of each character in the story in depth, giving
historical backgrounds and reformulating the ‘common sense’ interpretations of the participants in more abstract religious terms. Often, this resulted in an impressive process of a group of people becoming aware of the meaning of a story, and being moved by it.

In this case, the meeting was a follow-up of a course to train lay believers to prepare family-services, all women, most with young children and some teachers. These women did not consider themselves to be especially pious Catholics; rather they were active community members and mothers, and involved in the church as a consequence. They had expected to learn how to make the proper decorations for family-services and how to choose the right songs. They were quite surprised that they were supposed to learn how to read the Bible, interpret the stories and distil the basic theme from a story to use it as a guideline in preparing family-services. Although they were happy to learn this, they were also insecure whether they would be able to implement the insights they had gained during the course. That is why they had requested to have follow-up meetings.

In his introduction, the pastor reiterated what they had learned during the course:

‘Don’t read the Bible as if it is a newspaper or an encyclopaedia. The gospel of Mathew was written 40 years after Christ died. Mark was written ten years before that, and the gospels of Luke and John after it. They are stories of faith. They are stories of people’s experience, and the faith that grew out of these experiences. Their experience was that Jesus did not remain dead, but lives on among the people. Of course this is hard to express. It’s just like when I ask a couple before they get married: “why this person”. They can only stammer in response.’

The participants discussed this point. One participant remarked (almost complaining) that if experience precedes faith, it is hard to have faith without experience. She was referring to the miraculous experiences of the stories in the Bible, which they considered to be very far from their own mundane experience. The pastor replied:

‘In those cases you have the tradition of faith, how people believed. We may be very far from that experience. However, in some moments our faith may be deepened. Although in every-day life, things may seem dull, dead, chaotic and destructive, you can compare this to autumn: things die, but every spring new life comes forth and it is always different from what you expect.’

Another participant asked: ‘so how do you get to this experience, if the “facts” are so unreliable?’

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* As I explained in chapter 4, the local community and the parish are not necessarily the same thing. If the parish priest is very active and accessible, they can be congruent. But usually, they are not.
Through imagery and symbolism one might get close. Or through experiencing nature. Even in science, reasoning through cause and effect reaches a point where it can get no further. Scientists have to admit that they cannot know more. Or when you are confronted by illness; a doctor might tell you what’s wrong with you biologically, but he cannot tell you why this is happening to you. So it is up to you to make sense of your illness.

He continued explaining how one should see the Bible, and especially the stories around the resurrection of Christ.

‘They are an elaboration of the declaration of faith; they try to tell about things that cannot be put into words. Just like people cannot explain why they want to marry this person and not another one. The Bible is a love letter. You need the key to be able to understand it.’

The women compared this to having children: you cannot know how wonderful it is until it happens.

The discussion turned to the practical side of using symbolism in services to bring the experience of ‘Jesus lives’ closer to people’s heart. The participants agreed that it is not enough to rely on the routine of the rituals they were used to, such as the Eucharist or marriage. These are only the outer acts, and one should focus on the meaning that underlies these acts. As with the Bible, these rituals should not be considered as a ‘formula’, a recipe for how to do things. However, to convey this meaning it is also important that people are open to what you are saying or they will not see it. Or as the pastor put it: ‘one should work with the grace you receive. Faith is a grace of God that makes you see the world differently’.

After the coffee break, the pastor asked one of the participants to read Mark chapter 16, verses 1 to 8. He started interpreting the story: ‘everything that is described

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1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him.
2 Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb.
3 They were saying to one another, “Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”
4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large.
5 On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed.
6 He said to them, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him.
7 But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.”

143
here is in fact a function of the central message: you are looking for Jesus in a place where he is no longer. And this is told by someone who is an outsider’. At first, the participants started comparing the events described in this story with the version of events they know from the other gospels and the Catholic tradition of the stations of the cross, pointing out similarities and differences, arguing over who was present and who was not and therefore which version of events of which gospel must have been closest to what actually happened.

However, the pastor wanted them to focus on the main message of the text:

‘The central sentence here is: “Jesus from Nazareth, who was crucified, has risen from death”. It is about life, which always wins. That does not mean that there is no death, it just means life always continues. The “stranger” sends them away to tell this to people. The fact that it is a total outsider who tells them what happened, indicates that these people could not have come up with this insight by themselves. Sometimes, this figure is called an angel; nowadays we would say he was an ambassador. The response of these women is that they get frightened’.

One of the participants asked: ‘so if we interpret this story symbolically, that means that literally, there was no resurrection? [i.e. he did not physically rise from the dead]’ Rather cryptically, the pastor responded: ‘in this story it is told that the things that faith will make happen are more important than the faith itself [i.e. what you believe in exactly, whether he really physically rose from the dead or not]’. He referred to Ghandhi and Martin Luther King: ‘These were people who stood up and told of their dream. And because they did, because they stood up as defenceless humans, they changed history.’

Then one of the women delivered the insight that drove the message home to all the participants:

‘Perhaps the fact that they could not find a body made these women anxious. Maybe they got frightened: because the body of Jesus was gone, that what he stood for was also gone. That now, it is up to themselves. Of course, every time you read the story it is different, but perhaps this is one interpretation.’

Coming from one of the women, this was a very bold interpretation and much more sophisticated than anything that had been said in the discussion preceding it. Everybody was surprised, and a bit scared at the daring of this lady. Besides, it was a statement that also summarized their own role as believers: scared and anxious of the responsibility. Instead of commenting on her statement, the pastor allowed a tense and expectant silence to stretch.

Then he stated: ‘the most important thing is to live it. When you realize that, you get frightened [i.e. just like the women in the story]’. Relieved and happy, the women

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8 Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark Chapter 16, 1-8)
started breathing again. Then the pastor told about the night before he was made a
priest, that he was so scared he wanted to cancel everything. Someone else told him:
calm down, everybody has that feeling. The women laughed at his story, and
commented in dialect: ‘it’s the same when you get married’.

This exchange broke the emotional tension of the previous moment, and evolved
into a humorous and comfortable sharing of experiences that was cut short by the pastor
who brought everybody around to consider the main message of the story:

‘I’m telling you this to show: sometimes you walk away from it. And
nowadays, faith has been changed into tradition. So the meaning has changed.
But what is important to us is how you could make a family service based on
the stories of the resurrection.’

While discussing this question, the participants confronted another problem: how to
make symbolical language understood to people in the way that you want it to be
understood. Some said that perhaps you should not even try: the people who go to
church already know what everything means. Or they go because they always went.
They are not looking for the things we are looking for in our faith’. But another
participant countered this: ‘you cannot presume to know how other people experience
things. Whatever your reason, they are all good to go to church, to occupy your mind
with religious things’.

The pastor put the issue of symbolic language in a broader perspective: ‘we often
assume people are like us. But that is no longer possible, society has become more
pluralistic [i.e. you have to creatively adapt your language and symbols and you can’t
anticipate how people will interpret what you say]’. The participants found other
examples of how people’s motivations can be different and the problems this might
cause. One participant brought up the problem that in some parishes, the other members
of the groups that are supposed to prepare the family services found it too farfetched to
actually read the stories of the Bible, much less discuss what they mean. ‘So how are you
supposed to compromise with those people?’ Again, the pastor emphasized that the
message of the gospels is not an easy one; it frightens people. ‘Again and again, we are
confronted with the question: will I let our life go on quietly the way it is, or will I try to
break through barriers’.

The participants of this course were pleasantly surprised and even moved by
what they learned in the centre, although they were uncertain of their own capacity to
challenge other people to see things the way they were learning to see them. One part of
the problem raised by them was the contrast with ‘traditional Catholicism’. To these
women, this mainly raised ‘political’ problems in their relationship with their parish
priest who might not agree with their interpretation. But to other people, the historically
critical reading on which the discourse of the centre is based also raised existential
problems. In section 3 I go into the ‘political’ problems in more detail. But first, I show
how the differences between a ‘traditional’ understanding of Catholicism and the
discourse of the centre can collide to create existential problems.
If it did not really happen, what is the value of those stories?!

Most newcomers to the centre were not experienced in reading the Bible, or if they were, they would read it ‘like a newspaper’ as the pastor put it. This is understandable if one realises that in traditional Catholicism, the reading of the Bible was not encouraged. Although the stations of the cross, the nativity plays at Christmas and other Catholic traditions re-enact stories in the Bible, most Catholics only know snippets of Bible-texts, conveniently quoted by their parish priest to underscore some argument or chanted by their mother to ward off some evil (like the first verses of the gospel of John to ward of lightning). The readings during church services are often hardly understood.

In the session described above, we can see that the pastor took considerable time to explain that the stories in the Bible should not be taken literally. Apparently, he found this necessary even though he had explained all this many times before during the course. Even though the participants accepted this view, they still found it difficult to tear themselves away from questions such as who was there during the resurrection and who was not because they wanted to determine ‘what really happened’. In this case, the pastor was successful in leading them away from these pre-occupations, and they were delighted by what they learned.

During the meetings of one discussion group I attended, one of the participants was less easily deterred from this line of questioning. In this discussion group, texts from the Bible that told of specific events around Moses, Isaac, Joseph and Jesus were compared to texts in the Koran that more or less tell the same story, although some details vary. The texts would be read, the pastor would give some historical background and explanation of terms, and the group would discuss the similarities and differences between the two texts.

The participants were mostly women, except the protagonist of this description, Bert, who said he was there because he was accompanying his wife. He humbly acknowledged that she was ‘better at understanding these kinds of things’ than he was, but nevertheless at times dominated the discussion with his questions.

The pastor and the other participants found his questions awkward and disturbing because he would always try to clear up the literal details of a story, which, as we saw in the description above, goes against everything they were teaching at the centre. For example, he would inquire whether Abraham took Ishmael or Isaac (in the Koran, it is Ishmael, in the Bible it is Isaac) to sacrifice when God asked him to bring his ‘most beloved son’. If Isaac was his most beloved son, this would point to the Jewish tradition in which Jesus was born as especially singled out to receive God’s message. However, if Ishmael was Abraham’s most beloved son, this could mean that it was the Arabic desert peoples who were favoured to receive God’s message. So by determining who was Abraham’s most beloved son, Bert thought that we could decide whether Jesus really was the Messiah or whether it is the Muslims who have the last word and Jesus was just a prophet.
Each time he asked a question like this, he was corrected by the pastor and by the other participants: ‘It’s not in those details, it’s about the message of the story’. In this case, it would be the message that God does not demand human sacrifices, even though Abraham expected him to demand this because perhaps it was normal in other religions at the time. According to the discourse of the centre, this story shows that the bond between man and God is not based on human sacrifices, but on ‘something else’, something less tangible that was left unspecified. Of course, these kinds of explanations did not really answer his real questions, so he resigned himself to a passive role.

During the second session of this group, the pastor was comparing the role of Moses in the stories of the Bible and the Koran. Someone exclaimed: ‘Isn’t it remarkable that all these people were saved at a crucial moment: Moses, Joseph, Isaac. That must mean something!’ The pastor replied: ‘Well yes, you could say they are all stories about how God showed himself as an active force in their lives.’

The term ‘active force’ stirred Bert out of his resignation. Eagerly, he asked: ‘Does that mean that it is historically proven that God actually did those things?’ Trying to accommodate his curiosity (while circumventing his real interest) the pastor explained that, historically, it is a fact that the Jewish people stayed in Egypt for a while, and were repressed and exploited. As for the incidents where God shows his hand she explained:

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

Bert emphasized again that his wife understood this kind of ‘metaphorical thinking’ much better than he did, he was not satisfied with the answers he got. Despite his respect for his wife’s capacities, he still could not get the question out of his mind: if it did not really happen, what is the value of these stories?!

The metaphorical, historically contextualized way of approaching the Bible he was learning here made him doubt his faith and the reliability of the clergy. Why did the priests in his youth always tell him that what they were saying was the literal truth, punishing anyone who dared to question them? Did they just fool the people then? ‘We had exams on it! And now it turns out to be all wrong?’

The other participants and the pastor tried to cool these indignant outbursts of confusion. To the pastor and to the other participants who had been coming to the centre more often, this issue was something they had come to terms with a long time ago. On this occasion, as on other occasions, the same clarifications and ways of coping were presented to the person afflicted by this kind of ‘shock’: of course, most priests were not intentionally misleading the people, they also used to believe all this. Some priests believe it even now. It’s no use getting angry with them: ‘what does this have to do with you?’ the pastor asked rhetorically. ‘Why bother with what other people thought or still
think, isn’t it better to focus on developing your own insight of what you think is true and right, and see what kind of comfort you can draw from the stories of the Bible?

This did not really convince Bert: he could not draw comfort from these stories, nor get his mind around this metaphorical thinking, nor get over the fact that what the priests used to tell him was all a load of nonsense. It depressed him that despite this realization that it was all nonsense, he still feared God as someone out to punish him.

To the other participants, it was clear that taking a story literally was a foolish idea. As one participant expressed it: ‘if we took these stories literally, we would still be taking “an eye for an eye”!’ They expected the man to get ‘past’ the literal stage, and see those priests and Catholics who are, in their eyes, ‘not able to get past that stage as occupying another stage of spiritual and psychological development.

The more experienced participants and active Catholics who had witnessed this evolution from religious certainty to religious uncertainty in their own lifetime often saw this as an inevitable outcome of modernization and progress. In this case, it was projected onto the Islam: one person, commenting on the current prominence of fundamentalism in Islam, suspected that this was because they ‘still take the Koran too literally’, thereby suggesting that it would only be a matter of time before they would progress to an acceptable, ‘modern’, less literal interpretation of their Holy Book. Most participants accepted this reassuring assessment (and it was not contradicted by the pastors). However, to temper this optimistic view someone added: ‘we also have Rome’ (considered to be ‘still’ too literal minded as well).

Among the more experienced participants of the courses and discussion groups of the centre, an emphasis on certain, absolute knowledge was considered outdated and questions formulated in such a way that they can only have one right answer were usually considered an embarrassment and rephrased by the pastors so that they could be answered from within the discourse.

3. THE BURDEN OF THE PAST

The interviews with the older generation discussed in chapter 3 would lead us to believe that the changes taking place within Catholicism were mainly confusing to people on the level of changing practical routines, such as the lifting of the obligation to attend church regularly, upsetting the continuity of community and family-life. However, the confrontation between Bert and the discourse of the pastoral centre shows how the past attempts of the Catholic Church to provide certainty and security and the emphasis on uncertainty of the pastoral centre can also create existential dilemmas. How is one to know what is fate, God’s will, absolute and unchangeable truth and what is not, if those who are ‘supposed to know’ keep changing their minds? When certainties suddenly change into uncertainties and bad things become good things and the other way around? When other religions are discussed not to determine what is right and wrong about them but just for the sake of discussing? To some, the past is still a significant obstacle to accepting the discourse of the centre.
As we saw, taking the theology and emphasis on rules and dogma of pre-Vatican II Catholicism as a point of departure, which many newcomers implicitly did, it can be difficult to explain that the Christianity preached in the centre is also Catholicism. In the Koran/Bible study group, the past evidently threw its shadow.

The man asking all those inappropriate questions had been trained to expect certain answers, and found only uncertainties instead. If everything they used to tell him turned out to be untrue, what are the answers to the ultimate questions? Should we pretend that it doesn’t matter whether God exists or not? It cannot be denied that whenever a worldview and the values it implies involves deities or supernatural entities there are a few very simple questions that will not be laid to rest: does God really exist? And if so, how are we supposed to live? To which he added: if they are not true, what is their value? This could perhaps be translated to the question: if we are not certain, how can we deduct values from it?

The discourse of the centre was entirely different in style, content and values from the Catholicism that the participants who were new to this discourse knew. They had simply drifted away from a practicing Catholic lifestyle, and had only vague notions of the beliefs that used to underlie the Catholicism of their youth. But one thing was certain: it was different from what they were learning here, and many things were considered sinful that to most people are normal and accepted. Even for those people who were not thrown into a state of existential confusion, this contrast raised questions. For Bert, the contradiction was problematic. On the other hand, the younger participants who were sent by their parishes to be trained at the centre would often light up once they learned to consider the Bible as something they could read by themselves and containing a message consistent with their own outlook on life, to see the church rituals as conveying important meanings instead of the territory of the priest in which they were assigned minor roles as figurants.

Their personal history with the church was often characterized by a resignation that they, as women, lay people, simple folk, would never fully understand the mysteries of religion and theology but that being a Catholic is an inalienable part of being a Limburger. To put it into more negative terms, they saw the church as an important part of community life and traditions, despite being old-fashioned. They were willing to lend a hand in these services to perpetuate community life, traditions, to give to their children what they themselves grew up with and out of a general feeling that God, after all, represents the highest moral values, even if the rules and rituals of his church are a bit outdated and boring. It was natural for them to ignore any disagreement between their personal outlook on life and what they assumed to be the teachings of the church, which anyway they would not be able to challenge, since they did not consider themselves to be ‘learned’ as the priest.

In chapter 4, we saw that the contradiction between the moral values of the younger generation and those of the church as represented in the policy of the diocese was usually not felt as problematic, except where they clashed in the actual practice of organizing the last rites. In learning to read and interpret the Bible in the way described
above, contradictions would also suddenly emerge from their hiding places. Rather than adopting a set of traditional practices and inaccessible liturgy that they cherished in the name of community and roots, ‘being a Catholic’, or rather, being a Christian, turned out to be a source of inspiration on which anybody could draw and which underpinned the values they already espoused.

In their reception of newcomers to the courses, one of the first aims of the pastors and the other participants was to get them to be comfortable with the fact that nowadays, there are no certainties in faith. The participants who had been coming more often already knew this, and showed it by saying things like: ‘you might also wonder whether we are on the right track’. Or: ‘perhaps it’s a good thing that all those stories about Jesus don’t agree with each other, otherwise we would think we already knew everything there is to know about him. At least this way, nobody can claim to know the ultimate truth’. This implied that openness and respect towards other religions and worldviews is not only the most commendable attitude, but also the most rational. As we saw in the description of the confrontation between Bert and the discourse of the centre, the search for an ontology from which moral values can be deduced is represented as something that belongs to the past: it’s not about the facts, it’s about the message. It’s not about the question whether Jesus was bodily risen or had disappeared from the grave, but the fact that those women realized that from now on, it was up to them.

However, newcomers often did expect to be told some timeless truths about the nature of God, Jesus, and the way you are supposed to live. That is religion. And even experienced participants would fall silent in amazement when the role and authority of the priest was relativized by giving the historical background of how this role developed out of necessity, and could in fact be criticized using the passages of the gospel where Jesus gives the Pharisees a piece of his mind. Although most participants were happy to deconstruct the authority of priests in this way, they were not accustomed to hearing it from ‘religious experts’ (who were sometimes also ordained priests) themselves.

All this was clarified by describing Catholicism (or rather, Christianity in general) as a faith that is continuously evolving, along with people’s imperfect understanding of God and the message of the gospels. The ‘old church’ was often described as hierarchal, insensitive in enforcing its rules, petty in detailing the kinds of sins and their penances, stifling real faith by imposing a heavy burden of duty, discriminating against women, distrustful of human nature, fear inspiring, denying people’s individuality, in short: not a ‘happy message’. Using people’s personal memories as illustration, this kind of Catholicism would be placed firmly in the past, something that you need not dwell on too much: since Vatican II, the church recognizes the importance of personal conscience, is more sensitive to the role of women, less hierarchical, less dogmatic.

Nevertheless, it was also recognized that this past could still play a role that needs to be addressed, especially in the course on lay pastorate for the elderly. An important topic during this course, also used as a case during the actual training in
pastoral conversation, was how to cope with the negative feelings that people might have about the church, because they might project these feelings onto the lay parish volunteer visiting them. The lay pastors in training had no trouble imagining that this was still an issue, especially for older people who might feel as if they have been deceived: what happened to the all-powerful church of their youth that used to have all the answers?

The strategy proposed by the pastors was that they should try to separate the identification between church and God. To simply halt at the conclusion that the church has failed would not provide any comfort. The important thing in these cases, they were taught, was to find ways to bring the subject around to God again and to suggest ways that the person in question could start thinking of God as benign and loving, rather than punishing and cold.

So although the pre-Vatican II church might be responsible for some painful personal memories and in general for an image of a ‘punishing’ God that should be dispelled, the discourse of the centre carefully constructed the stereotype of pre-Vatican II Catholicism as only one, relatively short, chapter in the long history of people trying to figure out the best way to live according to the message of Jesus. Putting it this way, the burden of the past was lightened.

When the participants indeed came to accept this past as harmless and unthreatening to their present outlook on life, the impression of a status quo, a consensus was created where the idea of a threatening God and its attendant attitudes of fear and tension could be left behind. It became possible to see the church as a human construct, rather than as a divinely ordained hierarchy in which the assigned role of lay people and especially women was to be that of silent figurants.

4. THE PROBLEM OF THE PRESENT

However, the hierarchical church promoting a version of Catholicism that rests on the mechanism of the sacraments, and thereby (the threat of) exclusion, is definitely not something of the past. As we have seen in the previous chapters, it represents one side of an extremely polarized Catholic Church, especially in Limburg, of which the discourse of the pastoral centre can be taken to represent the other side. The beliefs, values and mechanisms of exclusion that course participants are encouraged to leave behind, is very much part of the ‘present’ created by the Roman policy of appointing conservative bishops. This creates problems both for the pastors and for the participants of the courses.

The pastoral centre does not explicitly present itself as ‘progressive’ to the course participants, and usually does not admit to being at odds with the Catholicism of the diocese. Rather, as we saw, they present themselves as the ‘next stage’, where ‘people are the church’; using much the same rhetoric as was used during the pastoral council in Noordwijkhout described in chapter 2. However, Noordwijkhout also led to the drastic measures of Rome and the appointment of neo-conservative bishops to ‘put
things right’ again in the Dutch church province (see chapter 4, sections 4 and 5). Since the appointment of Gijsen, neo-conservative Catholicism belied the ‘inevitable’ progress predicted by progressive Catholics and became politically more powerful in the diocese of Roermond. In terms of church-politics, progressive Catholicism, and therefore also the discourse of the centre had been marginalized during the years of Gijsen’s reign, although in terms of values it is much closer to Dutch mainstream moral consensus than the policy of the diocese.

This created dilemmas for the pastoral centre that were only rarely addressed openly. For example, following the official line of the diocese would mean excluding people from the sacraments if they do not live in accordance with the moral rules of the church. This is at odds with the ideals of the pastoral centre: not to exclude, not to prescribe what is right and wrong, not to emphasize certainty and the authority of the church in religious matters.

Politically, the pastors of the centre were involved in a balancing act between acting true to their own interpretation of the gospels, and the policy of the diocese. There were the ‘standard’ moral issues concerning (homo) sexuality, marriage, and divorce. These were mostly solved on a case-to-case basis away from the eyes of the bishop. During the courses and in their publications, the pastors avoided discussing particular ‘rules’ explicitly and the topic of sexuality and birth control was avoided altogether. This avoidance came not only from a desire not to stir up animosity with the diocese, but also because the issue of what is and what is not allowed by the church was completely irrelevant within the moral discourse of the centre. What is relevant is whether behaviour is respectful of other people, brings into practice the values of ‘loving thy neighbour as thyself’ and protects the weak. Whenever behaviour was discussed that was unquestionably ‘bad’ in the sense that it was destructive towards other people or towards one’s own person (e.g. alcoholism or criminality) the efforts were directed towards understanding why people would ‘turn away from God’, the unhappiness and hurt this implied, and looking for ways to promote harmony, forgiveness and love. Because the policy of both Wiertz and the pastoral centre was to avoid confrontation, these ‘moral issues’ were not really an issue.

Lay perceptions of church morality

Most visitors of the centre were in some way aware of the neo-conservative ‘hard line’ of the diocese; Gijsen’s reign lasted for more than twenty years, and the many conflicts he had are embedded in collective memory somewhere. Almost all of the course participants would agree that the moral positions of the hard line are ‘outdated’. As elaborated in chapter 4, to the people of Limburg being a Catholic, being active in the church has almost nothing to do with the question whether you would agree with everything the pope in Rome proclaims. Neither is it necessary to have any knowledge of what is in the Bible. As long as you are baptized and celebrated first communion, you are a Catholic and part of the local community. Being born in Limburg still almost automatically ensures that you will go through these rituals. As described in chapter 4,
in everyday life the discrepancy between this common sense understanding of ‘being Catholic’ and the ‘official’ church doctrine is not very problematic.

Although the ‘standard’ moral issues were not much discussed in the courses, there were also the issues of lay participation in religious services, and the degree of openness towards other religions. On both, the diocese has strict guidelines, although local priests had widely different practices. This impacted directly on the ability of volunteers to contribute to parish life. Therefore, it is interesting to take a closer look at how the contradictions between ‘traditional’ and ‘neoconservative’ Catholicism and the discourse of the pastoral centre were perceived by the participants of the courses.

The pastoral centre actively promoted openness to other religions and ecumenism, and saw lay participation as the present-day translation of what Jesus was preaching against the ‘rule minded’ Pharisees. To any participant who listened closely, the message was clear: it is not the rules that matter, it is the spirit of God’s love shown in the life of Jesus that has to be discovered and promoted in daily life.

Often, it took some time before new participants were motivated and had the courage to really participate in interpreting the gospels. But mostly, it would be an exciting experience for them. During the second meeting of a course, they would comment: ‘I have been thinking and thinking things over this week, my mind was whirling’. Some people even reported to have dreamt about what they had learned.

The shift in attitude that the pastoral centre tried to provoke was for people to start taking their own thoughts and evaluations as a point of departure, to start trusting and developing them as legitimate. The aim was to replace the residual attitudes of unflinching acceptance of the authority of the priest over religious ‘facts’ and ritual acts. The shift in attitude from being ‘born’ Catholic to actively reflecting on it usually created enthusiasm, but also revealed confusion, uncertainties and tensions, as we saw in the description of the meeting on interpreting the stories of resurrection.

Confusion; because some of the participants found it hard to learn how to think ‘metaphorically’ to extract the main message from a story or a ritual act. Uncertainty; because the participants did not trust that they would be able to reflect like this on their own, outside the context of the course. And tension; because they were especially uncertain whether they would be able, even if they had managed to interpret a Bible text according to their own insights, to defend their conclusions to their local priest and fellow parishioners.

The tensions this confusion and uncertainty generated were usually just below the surface. In the course on creating a family service, this tension was addressed during the same meeting I described in section 1. This description picks up where I stopped in the first section, with the pastor passionately explaining his views of the gospels, and finding an attentive audience who had just experienced a moving insight of their own responsibility in ‘living’ the message of Jesus:

‘Every time again, you are confronted by the question: will I let my life just go on quietly as it is, or do I try to go through barriers, get to the essence of
things. Comparing what you learn here with what used to be taught as Catholicism before is not the important issue [this refers to earlier discussion about the past]. The gospels were written to tell people who did not know Jesus about his life. Nowadays, you see that caring for other people is often a problem. So the message of Jesus is still relevant. And then, you get frightened sometimes. However, don’t expect to get any ready made answers from the Bible’.

Everybody agreed to this, but then, one woman burst out: ‘this is not what the parish priests are preaching in our church! Now you find things out for yourself. But you have to come up with the courage to shut down the voice of the priest [in reading the Bible]’. At first, the pastor awkwardly sidestepped this comment on his colleagues: ‘if people are touched in their hearts and minds, it’s fine. If they get irritated, they’re also touched, but in a negative way’. Another participant took up this issue: ‘but suppose you would protest? Those priests wouldn’t care at all. They will just shut the door. We think we are right, but they also think they are right’. The pastor asked: ‘like the old priest in A?’. But the participants dismissed him as a problem: ‘he’s not so bad, at least he’s open to discussion, and too old to change anyway. It’s the young priests that are the worst! They are not open to change. They don’t care about our views at all’.

They were referring to those priests who follow the diocesan policy very strictly, who had been trained at Rolduc or another conservative seminary, and explicitly discourage people from participating in the communion if they are not living in accordance with the moral rules of the church. Obviously, this goes directly against what the participants had been taught during their course, and they were trying to get a pronouncement from the pastor confirming that this was unacceptably callous behaviour. Still sidestepping, the pastor said: ‘well, but he will also have to account for his life before God when he dies’.

With the subject out in the open, the group was gathering steam in sharing stories expressing their indignation about ‘bad priests’. The pastor allowed them the space to tell their stories without commenting. Finally, one woman could not contain herself any longer, broke through the taboo on expecting certainties and ready-made answers, and explicitly asked for the final verdict of the pastor: ‘are they allowed to deny people communion?’ Amused, the pastor winked to me, sharing his enthusiasm about the astuteness of these women who were putting him on the spot. He answered: ‘that was the question between Jesus and the Pharisees. I would never refuse the communion. Of course, I know the rules of the church. But how can I judge if someone is sinful or not?’ Pushing the point home even more explicitly, another participant said: ‘But even if you could judge, the gospels say Jesus was there exactly for those people, for the sinners, wasn’t he?’ To which the pastor answered: ‘the point is, that you decide. Don’t think too much of the priest, because he sends you home empty handed’.

As we can see here, the problem of the past was manageable in terms of the discourse of the centre, the problem of the present much less so. A straightforward confrontation (we think we are right, but they also think they are right) raised difficult
issues that cannot really be resolved on the level of the official discourse. The pastors never dismissed anybody as ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ during the courses and discussion groups. Not only was it politically inadvisable, it also would go directly against the restraint in moralizing that they were trying to promote.

Usually, it was only when course participants pointed out that it was especially the young, newly trained priests who were taking the hard line (rather than the old, who could be explained as relics of the past), that the reality of polarization within the church was admitted into the discussion\textsuperscript{67}. However, it was precisely on these issues that people were most vocal, and hardest to restrain by the pastors in expressing ‘moral indignation’. Some people would say that in their reaction against cultural change and modernization, ‘they’ (the neoconservative priests and Gijzen) ‘chased people out of the church’. Older people who had been active Catholics during the time the forces of renewal were dominant in Limburg complained that they could not recognize themselves anymore in the present day Catholic Church: ‘I’m a religious refugee’. \textsuperscript{66}

5. UNCERTAINTY AS A MORAL GOOD

The contrast between ‘traditional Catholicism’ and the discourse of the centre revolves around certainty and uncertainty, infallibility versus fallibility, democratic and local versus hierarchical and Rome-centred and a living God, rather than a punishing God. It is important to realize that in the discourse of the centre, uncertainty about the existence of God, the precariousness of faith and the impossibility to come up with one ‘correct’ interpretation of the Bible were actually seen as a moral good. Within this discourse, certainty and claims to ‘absolute truths’ were considered to be dangerous psychological props that will ultimately lead to fundamentalism and attempts to lay down the law for other people. Time and again, this was shown to be incompatible with the democratic egalitarian spirit reflected in the life and teachings of Jesus. In the Bible discussion group for example, the pastor would often emphasize that ‘maybe we [Christians] are lucky to have four gospels that are so often contradictory. Because that means that no one can claim to be the ultimate authority on religious matters’.

Religious language and terminology was similarly modified. The pastors of the centre rather spoke of ‘Christianity’ in general (including protestants) than ‘the Catholic

\textsuperscript{67} In the discussion groups where people knew each other for a longer time this was an accepted topic.

\textsuperscript{66} Another ‘problem of the present’ is the prevalence of non-believers and people who are estranged from the church. However, this was addressed straightforwardly during the courses, and adequate strategies had been worked out to deal with it. In fact, according to those who referred me to the center in the first place it is one of the strengths of the center to establish communication about religious subjects no matter what the background of the person they were talking to. In all their courses, the pastors taught the participants to be flexible, to tune into the level of understanding, vocabularies, objections and negative perceptions their target group might have against religion, without compromising the religious message.

155
Church’ in particular, and made sure that their pronouncements did not exclude people with different beliefs or ‘no’ beliefs from consideration. Discussion about specific Christian doctrines such as the Holy Trinity were cut short by pointing out that God could not be described by one single concept and therefore needed several. Disagreements on ‘ontology’ (the nature of God, of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit, the existence of heaven and hell) were reduced to confusion caused by the fact that their reality and concept is too big for any human mind to understand. Any pronouncement on their nature is merely a human attempt to describe their spiritual reality that should be understood as a metaphor.

Rather than emphasizing dogmas certified by the pope, belief in God was sometimes almost mystically conceptualized as a personal loss, a relinquishing of control, an admittance that one does not know, that nobody can fully know God. As we can see in the way the stories around the resurrection of Christ were interpreted, it was considered intrinsic to faith that one should face uncertainty, the intangibility of faith and one’s personal responsibility to keep it alive and act on it. Faith means the admittance that one does not know everything, or understand the reason of suffering, and still puts one’s trust in God.

As one woman told her fellow participants once:

“When I lost my baby, I cursed God, I hated him. I had prayed and prayed to him to let my baby live and he had not answered my prayers. But then I got pregnant again, and I had twins! Then I started to understand the words: “not my will, but thy will be done”.”

The pastors too, would often emphasize that one should not pray to God as someone who will do what you want: ‘praying does not change the situation, but it changes the person in the situation’.

In the discourse of the pastoral centre, any problems or worries, painful experiences and guilt feelings should be ‘given in the care of God’, placed in the domain of things one cannot control. Attempting to control these things, and attempting to gain certainty about what which is greater than you was seen as a dangerous psychological weakness that can lead to ‘unhealthy’ and undesirable behaviour towards other people such as fundamentalism.

One of the ladies, who had been coming to the centre for many years, summed up the first session of the Koran/Bible discussion group by saying:

‘Fundamentalism is always bad. But all religions seem to return to the same God again and again, and that’s what makes me feel good. Before, religion was never a happy message. But since the second Vatican council [it became a happy message]... and my husband, he was the one who taught me to follow my own conscience. That’s why I live much more freely than I lived before’.

This uncertainty and the emphasis on God as a loving God rather than a ‘punishing God’ was also invoked as a medicine against the burden of the past of the Catholic
Church. Although it was not emphasized, the position of most pastors in the centre was heavily influenced by the critique of the ‘spiritual liberators’ on pre-Vatican II Catholicism, which had gained dominance during the time most of these pastors were educated.

Inclusiveness

The main criterion of the moral consciousness encouraged by the pastoral centre was inclusiveness, connected to the image of a loving God and contrasted with the organization of pre-Vatican II Catholicism that emphasized exclusion and the punishment that awaited sinners. In the discourse of the centre this was summarized as ‘the image of a punishing God’ that the parish volunteers should always avoid evoking. On this value, the discourse of the centre and the common sense perceptions of the participants met with a happy smile of recognition. Once inclusiveness was established as a key value taught in the gospel, every issue was discussed using inclusiveness as the critical lens; and referring to it as the final touchstone would satisfyingly round off every discussion. Inclusiveness in this context implied openness and respect towards other religions, other lifestyles, other tastes, etc.

Emphasizing inclusiveness made any discussion about ‘rules’ (such as: is homosexuality ‘allowed’ or not) superfluous. ‘Rule-mindedness’ rather than the rules themselves was discussed and condemned. This is an important distinction that is of course related to the changes in discourse in Dutch Catholicism brought about by the ‘spiritual liberators’ described in chapter 2.

The deconstruction of the concept of sin and the mechanism of the sacraments

The influence of psychology was evident in many ways in the discourse of the centre, from the way the Bible was interpreted from the perspective of the psychologies of each of the actors in a story to the moral orientation with regard to contemporary issues. The psychological turn was especially evident in the way the ‘old fashioned’ concept of sin was re-interpreted: sin was primarily seen as the result of psychological ineptness, fear and mistrust, a turning away and closing off from God. Putting one’s trust in God, as Jesus did, and keeping faith in his fundamentally loving and inclusive nature can remedy this.

The contrast between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ way of understanding sin often came out explicitly when stories were discussed where Jesus or one of the prophets from the Old Testament makes a negative statement about someone or some group of people in the vein of: those who will not recognize the truth will be damned. This reminds of the old ‘mechanism of the sacraments’ that was at the root of the painful stories that would sometimes come out during the interviews with the older generation described in chapter 3: those who do not adhere to the rules of the Church will be excluded.

In the centre, these stories would be turned around, by focusing on the promise held out to those willing to listen, rather than on the punishment of those not willing to
listen. The punishments for those who were unwilling to listen would also be interpreted psychologically: by not listening to God’s messenger, people condemned themselves to stay in a state of psychological and spiritual darkness and confusion. Rather than a mechanism of exclusion, the sacraments would be interpreted as a ritual celebration of key religious and psychological moments, linking these moments to the religious symbols of the Catholic tradition.

Whenever a situation was discussed that would, traditionally, come in for disapproval, it was first described in neutral, descriptive terms. This description would be followed by a careful consideration of the meanings involved in the situation and how they might vary to the different actors involved. Then it would be evaluated and the appropriate action in terms of the role one could personally play in it was suggested.

One example was the way the wish for baptism was represented in one of the discussion groups. The subject was the story describing how John baptized Jesus. This was interpreted as a spiritual rebirth for Jesus. One member roundly criticized traditional Catholic baptism: babies are not aware, so they cannot be reborn spiritually. Her criticism was even more vehement on the subject of the way baptism was used as a ‘marker’: if a baby was not baptized, it was buried outside the cemetery because the stain of original sin was not washed away yet. If you are not baptized, you do not ‘belong’, you are an outsider, you are still marked by original sin. According to her, this is ‘sick’. Other participants however, said that nevertheless, parents often want to have their children baptized even when they themselves are not married in church. Then the pastor explained how he approached this phenomenon:

‘Often, parents want to have their baby baptized despite not being active believers, for example they were not married before the church. Some priests would say: it’s useless to baptize the child, because you will never see it again. But to me [the pastor], this situation indicates that they see marriage as something between the two of them, whereas when they have a baby, they feel the responsibility for a new life and they want to give it something. They want to have the child baptized because they realize it’s not something that belongs to them alone. The point is to give the child the baggage for his life, of the life as Jesus of Nazareth lived it. So perhaps baptism could be seen more and more as the sacrament of the parents’.

This example shows how ‘old meanings’ (those parents are careless and inconsistent Catholics) are removed and new meanings are discovered through imagining the feelings and thoughts of the people involved. The way this pastor interpreted the apparently inconsistent behaviour of parents was greeted with thoughtful approval.

Whenever disapproval was voiced during the discussion groups and courses, relativizing remarks were quickly added, or rules were established by which people

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* Note that although it is similar to the way people described their motivations for having their children baptized (see chapter 4), it has a much more explicitly religious slant.

158
were admonished to ‘keep their pronouncements on a personal level’: no one could get away with generalizing from their personal experience to make judgments on others. The taboo on moralizing is perhaps the only absolute in the discourse of the centre.

6. Gossip and Stereotyping

Due to this rule for discussion, there was very little space for gossip in and around the courses and discussion groups. Not to gossip is impossible between people who share a significant amount of time and acquaintances with each other. Among the supporting staff and volunteers of the centre, gossip was shared during coffee breaks, but the topic would be changed quickly when a pastor came in. With me, pastors would only share gossip in personal conversations.

In anthropology, gossip is seen as a genre of conversation through which people share their views on the moral ordering of the community and indirectly enforce social control and bonding (Straating 1998). According to Straating, the main reason for engaging in gossip however, is simply pleasure. Sharing gossip is one way that people indicate that they feel comfortable with each other: sharing horror, outrage and disgust, loyally sympathizing with each other, creates a warm ‘we-feeling’. And of course, this ‘we-feeling’ is crucial to bonds of trust and reciprocity and delineates the familiar from the unfamiliar.

The moralizing in gossip is based on personal feeling, it can be explicitly disapproving, and it is based on stereotypes and prejudices. Moreover, the disapproval and judgments passed are based on personal loyalties rather than on systematic consideration. The ‘we-feeling’ created in this way is thus premised on ‘othering’ and stereotyping.

In all these characteristics, it goes against the discourse of the centre, which emphasizes inclusiveness, loving relations, a reserved attitude towards judging others and careful consideration of the psychologies of anyone being discussed. After all, no one human being can claim ‘true knowledge’ and certainty. Furthermore, there was an undercurrent of awareness that the scars of the exclusivist moralizing of the past made it absolutely taboo to pastors to be nonchalantly disapproving in making pronouncements on other people. So the language used in the centre was almost always politically correct, avoiding all ‘othering’.

This politically correct language and the values that underpin it are in stark contrast with the stereotypes of the young diocesan priests often referred to in informal interactions and gossip. These stereotypes were already discussed in chapter 4, and they also came to the surface during the session when the participants of the family-service course put the pastor on the spot by demanding that he condemn these priests in section 4 of this chapter.

\(^{70}\) Treating someone as an outsider, as different.
In practically everything, the stereotype of these priests is the ‘negative’ of the positive promoted by the discourse of the centre. Not only are they thought to be exclusivist and arrogant in passing judgment on others according to ‘outdated’ moral standards, they are also reputed to be very insensitive in personal interactions, casually and, in the eyes of the participants and volunteers of the centre, cruelly, making ironic remarks to their parishioners.

For example, one priest was reported to have said to a widow visiting her husband’s grave: ‘well, how can you be sure your husband entered heaven hm?’ When a remark such as this was discussed among the participants, most attention was given to the effect this had on the widow. The theological niceties of discussing whether heaven is really a ‘place’ into which one can be ‘denied entrance’, or a metaphor for a more elusive truth, might be pointed out by a pastor or a more experienced participant, but in informal discussion it would not be brought up. Everybody would simply side with the person who was hurt, condemning the priest.

It would seem that the only ‘others’ in the pastoral centre were the neo-conservative priests trained by Gijsen and his personal allies such as the priest of Welden, although this was only admitted on the level of informal interaction. The exchange of stories about these priests, especially in formal settings of the courses and discussion groups, was usually be limited before this exchange could heat up emotions to the point of creating that warm ‘we-feeling’ of moral righteousness among the participants.

However, judgment of these priests in particular, and anyone espousing a ‘literal’ and exclusive worldview in general, was underpinned by the evolution from certainty to uncertainty projected onto Christianity, Catholicism and social organization as well as people’s personal spiritual and psychological development. This ‘inevitable evolution’ was also supported on the level of official discourse as I showed in section 2. Thus, the more experienced participants could set aside these priests as psychologically immature people that one did not have to take too seriously, as people who wanted to ‘turn back the clock’, an attempt inherently doomed to fail. Although this was not part of the formal discourse, the pastors did not contradict this view, nor could they offer any other view that would make these pastors more ‘human’ and less stereotypical in the eyes of those who judged them.

The question of ‘who is right’, which was sidestepped on the level of formal discourse, could only be resolved on the informal level: they (the people espousing progressive Catholic values) were right, because their stereotypical archenemies were immature young priests, oblivious to the hurt they caused people. This created a tension that was perhaps anproblematic to the ‘insiders’ of the discourse of the centre, who knew better than to ask such questions, but was keenly felt by new participants and sometimes came to the surface in indignant outbursts.

Interestingly, the older priests who invoked the mechanism of the sacraments and their prerogative as a priest were not similarly judged. Usually, they were viewed
with a mixture of compassion and acceptance: they are too old to change now, and anyway, ‘imagine if we did not have our old priest, we would have no priest at all and that is even worse!’

Unrelated and perhaps irrelevant is the observation that a paradoxical effect of suppressing the moralizing inherent in gossiping and sharing moral outrage has the effect of suppressing the development of the initial ‘we-feelings’ of people becoming familiar with each other. Of course, many participants managed to create this feeling with each other outside the context of the courses, and it might be the stronger because of the need to keep their moralizing hidden on the level of formal discourse. But the suppression of these we-feelings made a strange contrast with the inclusive values also encouraged by the centre. Although ‘we are all God’s children’ one has to learn to navigate the tricky waters of political correctness, learn to speak in a way that avoids all (implicit) judgment, before one is able to share in this we-feeling without getting reprimanded by those who are telling you this.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Strikingly, some values central to the discourse at this centre are based on the explicit acknowledgment of uncertainties rather than certainties. It emphasizes what we, as humans, do not know, cannot control. To pretend to know, to pretend to be able to control is seen as ‘bad’. Rather than positing an ontology of the world and deducing moral values from it, it takes the ‘mainstream’ modern understanding of the world as a point of departure and sees the Christian tradition as a chequered attempt to understand the ‘radical message of love’ that can be read in the life and actions of Jesus.

Generally, the participants were receptive to the discourse of the centre. However, the understanding of Catholicism among new participants was coloured by the dogmatic Catholicism the older generation in Limburg grew up with and traditional Catholic customs. Usually, the pastors were quite skilful in clearing up this barrier.

Nevertheless, the tendency to interpret stories literally and ask how things ‘really are’ or what ‘really happened’ was strong. Why is this? One might speculate that this is an attempt to probe and question the moral reasoning of pre-Vatican II Catholicism enshrined in collective memory in fragments mainly connected to things not allowed and reasons to exclude people from the sacraments. The power of disapproval vested in anything or anyone connected to the church is still great, as well as the need for ‘definite’ answers to ward of this threat of disapproval.

Although the staff of the pastoral centre presented their discourse as the ‘mainstream’, ‘normal’ and modern Catholicism, the history of the ‘official’ Catholic Church in Limburg has not cooperated with this representation since Gijsen was installed as a bishop in 1972. The differences between the discourse of the centre and pre-Vatican II Catholicism as well as the official policy of the diocese were often downplayed.
Every now and then, the main value of inclusiveness that was shown to underlie much of Jesus’ teachings would lead participants to address the conflict between the discourse of the centre and the policies of the diocese. On the level of the official discourse of the centre this problem could not be resolved since it explicitly refrains from any statements about right or wrong. However, on the level of ‘unofficial’ bonding between people it was clear that Gijsen’s priests were ‘wrong’, not so much because they were theologically in error, but because their behaviour represented the negative of the values promoted by the centre.

Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, pastors and participants shared a belief that religious faith progresses from a literal belief in dogmas to a more metaphorical understanding of the teachings of Christianity. This evolution was projected onto those whose beliefs were ‘still’ too literal, underpinning more exclusive religious interpretations and practices. This gave an added dimension to the stereotype of ‘bad priests’ invoking the mechanism of the sacraments as ‘psychologically immature’ and unable to accept the uncertainties of faith. This stereotype of bad priests was not only invoked in the pastoral centre, as we saw, but also played a role in the narratives around death and dying and the role of the church in this as described in chapter 4.

Combining the themes that emerged in this context with an insight into the larger religious landscape of which the pastoral centre is a part, we can conclude that it is both the ‘burden of the past’ and the ‘problematic present’ that implicitly shape this religious landscape and its moral space. It is both ‘the burden of the past’ and the ‘problematic present’ that make the discourse of the centre relevant, especially to those Limburg Catholics who are prepared to give a more specifically ‘religious’ and moral content to their Catholic identity. At least the discourse of the centre easily negotiates the distrust towards authority, and explicitly puts itself ‘at the service’ of the familiar domain. At the same time, the interaction between context, past and present, created dilemmas that could not be solved on the formal level of discourse.

Many of the course participants did not come in the first place as active believers. To many of them, community involvement naturally led to church involvement, which in turn led them to participate in the courses of the centre. This was connected to efforts supported and sometimes initiated by the diocese to revitalize parish life and diminishing its dependency on priests. As long as doing the proper Catholic rituals is still important to ‘being a Limburger’ the challenge for the neo-conservative faction is to take advantage of this without creating enmity through an unwise policy of excluding people. The challenge for the ‘progressive faction’ would be to participate in this revitalization without being marginalized or muffled. Since the people in the village communities in the south of Limburg attach great importance to perpetuating the local community and traditions, this reorganization of parish-life could well lead to a new kind of community Catholicism with much better informed and trained Catholics, with only an occasional priest to serve different parishes.

The other option is that living a life according to the rules of the Catholic Church will be one lifestyle choice among others, attracting not the ‘pillars of the community’
but mainly individual believers. Those who are not attracted to this kind of Catholicism can always go elsewhere. This would mean that the ‘natural’ connection between local community and Catholicism would be further weakened. Already, there are many ‘new rituals’, especially around birth and marriage, in which the church only plays a small role (see also Lukken 2001).

In either scenario, whether the polarization within the Catholic Church will still play such a large role in the future is up to the policy of Rome and the bishops in the Netherlands. The trend seems to be towards consolidating the flock that is left and purging ‘progressive’ elements in the liturgy, staff etc.. How this will impact on Dutch Catholics is also uncertain. One might speculate that with each generation the memory of the total control that the church used to be able to exert over individual and social life will fade more. With this, the force of stereotyping of bad priests might also fade: soon, people might not feel the power of disapproval of the church anymore and the mechanism of the sacraments will lose its power to cause moral outrage.
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 metaphorical 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 depillarization 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 scripted71. 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 Versteeg 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
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 out 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 folk 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 men7. 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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7 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 Noordwijkerhout. 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 others)?

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 for 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.

176
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, commodititized 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 diocese 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 focal 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.
NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

‘Geloof in het vertrouwde: continuïteit en verandering in religieuze praktijken en morele oriëntatie in Zuid-Limburg’

In hoofdstuk 1 - het inleidende hoofdstuk - worden de casus, de theoretische achtergrond en de probleemstelling geïntroduceerd. Dit proefschrift beschrijft de aard en plaats van religie in hedendaags Zuid-Limburg tegen de achtergrond van de veranderingen in de Nederlandse samenleving en de Rooms Katholieke Kerk sinds de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Bij de beschrijving en analyse van hedendaagse religiositeit in Zuid-Limburg ga ik vooral in op de rol van religie in morele oriëntatie. Vooral lokaal ingebonden vormen van religie waar mensen uit de gemeenschappen in de dorpen van Zuid-Limburg aan deelnemen komen aan bod. Deze studie situeert zich theoretisch gezien in het debat rondom secularisatie: klopt de secularisatie-theze nog wel? Hoe kunnen we begrijpen dat oude vormen van religie toch niet geheel verdwijnen, en er allerlei nieuwe vormen bijkomen? Vaak wordt gesteld dat hedendaagse vormen van religiositeit gezien kunnen worden als antwoord op de vergaan de individualisering in West-Europese samenlevingen en wellicht ook als een respons op de beperkingen van een puur rationalistisch wereldbeeld.

Hoofdstuk 2 beschrijft de veranderingen in het morele discours in de katholieke kerk, vooral de veranderingen die de grootste gevolgen hadden voor de ‘gewone gelovigen’. Gedurende de eersre naoorlogse jaren vond een consolidatie plaats van de katholieke zui die katholieken zou moeten beschermen tegen de gevaren van de moderne tijd. De greep van de geestelijkheid op het geloofs- en morele leven van mensen werd via verplichte biecht en het onthouden van de sacramenten aan zondaars verder geperfectioneerd. Dit noem ik het ‘mechanisme van de sacramenten’: spirituele en sociale uitsluiting werden aan elkaar gelijkgesteld via de organisaties van de katholieke zui die zoveel mogelijk aspecten van het leven van katholieken zou moeten bestrijken. Deze organisaties werden gedomineerd door de grote aantallen geestelijken die de Nederlandse katholieken toen nog voortbrachten.


Vanaf de jaren zeventig volgde Rome een beleid waaruit het ongenoegen met de vooruitstrevendheid van de Nederlandse katholicen duidelijk bleek: het Vaticaan stelde een aantal uiterst conservatieve bisschoppen aan, zoals bisschop Gijsen in
Limburg. Desondanks geloofden vele actieve katholieken dat de weg die zij waren ingeslagen onherroepelijk was; het benauwde katholieke verleden van zonde en straf moest worden afgeworpen, veranderen was onvermijdelijk. Het Romeinse beleid heeft ook in Limburg diepe sporen achtergelaten: progressieve katholieken werden gemarginaliseerd in de organisatiestructuren van het bisdom. Ook op het niveau van lokale parochies leidde dit tot een polarisatie binnen de kerk die tot op de dag van vandaag merkbaar is. De vernieuwingsimpuls is de pas afgesneden, en neoconservatieve tisschoppen bepalen het beeld van de katholieke kerk in Nederland. In Zuid Limburg, waar de kerk lange tijd het monopolie op religie had, en via de verzuiide organisaties een ongekende invloed uitoefende, is de positie van de kerk in de samenleving echter sterk veranderd en is haar macht drastisch afgezonken.

In hoofdstuk 3 worden de ontwikkelingen in de kerk beschreven vanuit het perspectief van een aantal ‘gewone gelovigen’ in Welden¹⁴ van de vooroorlogse generatie. Er blijkt een grote discrepancie te bestaan tussen de manier waarop zij terug kijken op de veranderingen in de katholieke kerk en de representatie van het verleden die vaak door progressieve katholieken en wetenschappers wordt gegeven. Het blijkt dat zij de veranderingen óf de kerk als behalve als ‘onvermijdelijk’ zagen, maar als iets dat van boven werd opgelegd en waar zij erg aan moesten wennen. De uitzonderingen hierop zijn de mensen die buiten de eigen samenleving zijn geweest, zoals een oud-Indiëganger. Dit betekent niet dat er geen sprake was van rebellie en woede ten opzichte van de kerk, integendeel, maar dit werd meestal opgelost met de gedachte: ‘ik ga niet voor meneer pastoor naar de kerk, maar voor God’. Het leidde niet tot de gedachte dat ‘de kerk’ zou moeten veranderen.

Tijdens de interviews kwamen ook veel verhalen naar boven waaruit bleek dat mensen hadden geleden onder de gevolgen van de strenge toepassing van het ‘mechanisme van de sacramenten’. Velen vonden het nog altijd pijnlijk om deze verhalen te vertellen. Dit is de andere, sterk geïndividualiseerde kant van het succes van de controle die de katholieke geestelijkheid wist uit te oefenen over het leven van mensen: blijkbaar nemen dit soort pijnlijke verhalen nog altijd geen vanzelfsprekende plaats in in het collectieve geheugen van mensen van de vooroorlogse generatie. Dit ondanks het feit dat zij een grote rol spelen in de representaties van ‘progressieve’ katholieken van het verleden, en de rol die zij aan dit leed toeschrijven als katalysator van de veranderingen die plaatsvonden vanaf de jaren zestig.

Uit de verhalen van deze mensen blijkt dat de veranderingen in de kerk hen in eerste instantie vooral troffen via het veranderende gedrag van de priesters en kapelaans: zij gingen vrijer met vrouwen om, sommigen kregen vriendinnen en trouwden zelfs. Dit werd door velen gezien als verraad: zij waren altijd met het hel en verdoemenis gedreigd om naar de kerk te gaan, en nu hielden de geestelijken zich zelf

¹⁴ Dit is een pseudoniem
niet aan hun eige: regels. Desondanks had dit volgens henzelf Weinig gevolgen voor hoe zij zelf over seksualiteit en moraal dachten, en zij zagen geen grote verschillen in de waarden volgens welke zij hun leven leidden en de waarden waarnaar hun kinderen leven. Zij zijn het er wel allemaal over eens dat het standpunt van de katholieke kerk wat betreft voorbehoedsmiddelen onhoudbaar was geworden. Maar wat betreft de jongste generatie, de ‘pubers’ van nu, hebben zij wel hun twijfels die vooral te maken hebben met seksualiteit en druggebruik. Vooral de oudere vrouwen hebben grote moeite met de ‘loszandigheid’ van jongeren, en in hun taalgebruik is merkbaar dat de moraal van kuish: diep in hen verankerd is. Zijn zien het seksuele gedrag van jonge meisjes allesbehalve als een ‘bevrijding’ maar als het resultaat van een gebrek aan (zelf)respect.

Niet zozeer de veranderingen in het discours en de praktijken in de katholieke kerk sinds de jaren zestig namen een belangrijke plaats in in hun herinneringen (zoals het vieren van de mis in de lokale taal), maar vooral de veranderingen in de opgelegde regels die ingrepen op het niveau van de dagelijkse routinet zoals de plicht om op zondag naar de kerk te gaan. Dit trof hen vooral in hoe zij hun kinderen opvoedden; hun eigen gezag werd ondermijnd op het moment dat hun kinderen thuiskwamen met de boodschap dat de kapelaan had gezegd dat zij niet naar de kerk hoefden als zij dat echt niet wilden. Door het afschaffen van de zondagsplicht werd ook het gezamenlijke ritme van het dorpse leven verstoord. Sommigen betreurden dat en zeiden dat er veel eenzaamheid is ontstaan als gevolg daarvan: iedereen zit voor zijn eigen televisie.

In de jaren tachtig werd bovendien een conservatieve pastoor aangesteld in Welden, een groot contrast met de vorige pastoor die erg progressief was en als een spin in het web van lokale verenigingen functioneerde. De nieuwe pastoor stelde zich veel autoritairder op en probeerde zijn neoconservatieve ideaal van de rol van de kerk in een dorpssamenleving door te voeren op een manier die veel mensen tegen de borst stuitte. Het resultaat was dat het dorpse leven verstoord werd, en uiteindelijk dat de rol van de parochiekerk in het dorpse leven tot een minimum werd teruggebracht. In andere dorpen, met een minder zuiverse geschiedenis, is deze rol vaak iets groter en staat de kerk dichter bij de gemeenschap. Het zijn nu vooral de oude mensen die naar de parochiekerk gaan, en vee: van hen gaan op zaterdagavond. Hoewel Welden een specifieke geschiedenis van polarisatie heeft die voor een groot deel is bepaald door het karakter van de individuele pastoors in kwestie, blijkt uit verhalen uit de dorpen rondom dat het aanstellen van zogenaamde ‘jonge’ neoconservatieve pastoors (zogenaamde ‘Gijsianen’) vaak leidt tot grote verontwaardiging. Dit thema komt nog herhaaldelijk terug in het boek.

_Hoofdstuk 4_ is een van de meest complexe hoofdstukken van dit boek, omdat in dit hoofdstuk een beschrijving wordt gegeven van de plaats die religie inneemt in Zuid-Limburg vanuit de verschillende vormen die religie kan aanvragen: rituelen, instituten, en religieuze en spirituele repertoires die op ‘commerciële’ wijze worden aangeboden via boeken en services waarvoor betaald moet worden. Het belangrijkste argument in
dit hoofdstuk is dat de plaats en aard van religie vooral begrepen zou moeten worden vanuit de ambivalentere relaties van mensen in de lokale gemeenschappen tot religieuze autoriteit. Hoewel het ‘zelf’ en subjectieve beleving steeds belangrijker worden, betekent dit niet dat religieuze autoriteit volledig heeft afgedaan, dat het individu geen enkele autoriteit boven zichzelf meer erkent. Religieuze autoriteit wordt op een veilige afstand gehouden, en wordt geëvalueerd in relatie tot ‘het vertrouwde’: de bekende wereld, familie, vrienden, de lokale gemeenschap. De morele integriteit van dit domein moet blijkbaar worden beschermd tegen de macht van (ge)institutionaliseerde religie.

Tijdens het onderzoek was het opvallend dat er soms verhalen over ‘slechte pastoors’ werden verteld waaruit grote morele verantwoordiging sprak. Het stereotype van de slechte pastoor bleek erg sterk te zijn, en vormde voor veel mensen de antithesis voor alles wat zij voor goed en juist hielden. Veel van deze verhalen over ‘slechte pastoors’ gingen over het gedrag van zo’n pastoor rondom sterven en begraven. Rondom deze gebeurtenissen komen actoren bijeen die normaal gesproken weinig direct met elkaar te maken hebben. Zij moeten dan onderhandelen over de manier waarop aan deze laatste rituelen vorm wordt gegeven. In deze onderhandelingen komt het instituut van de kerk binnen in een familie die meestal in crisis verkeert. De verschillende partijen hebben verschillende belangen, maar het is vooral het belang van ‘neoconservatieve’ pastoors waar hevig afwijkend op wordt gereageerd door de familie.

De lijn van het bisdom en van de neoconservatieve pastoors is om zoveel mogelijk de formele morele voorschriften van de katholieke kerk te volgen. De sacramenten spelen hierin een grote rol: voor de familie is het belangrijk dat iemand sterft ‘met alle sacramenten’: dat is de traditie, het ideaal van een mooi stervend bed. Een pastoor die de regels streng toepast verstoort dit ideaal op zeer pijnlijke wijze. Ondanks de afgeneemde macht van de kerk, heeft zij rondom dit belangrijke moment een zeer grote macht in handen, die sterk wordt gevoed en gevreemd. Het bisdom en de neoconservatieve pastoors die het beleid van het bisdom uitvoeren wakkeren deze angst aan door het uitsluitende karakter van de sacramenten te benadrukken. In sommige gevallen, wanneer men bang zijn dat hun eigen pastoor moeilijk zal doen (niet alleen wanneer er sprake is van euthanasie maar ook omdat iemand is gescheiden bijvoorbeeld, of omdat men van de kerk is vervreemd) wordt er gezocht naar een andere priester dan de lokale parochiepriester, iemand die erom bekend staat flexibel in te kunnen spelen op de psychologie en gevoeligheden van de situatie (vaak een priester van progressieve signatuur).

In het domein van het vertrouwde speelt een bijna magisch geloof in vooruitgang vaak een grote rol. De katholieke kerk wordt door veel mensen van de naoorlogse generaties als ouderwets gezien en niet van deze tijd: de morele voorschriften van de kerk gaan direct in tegen de algemene Nederlandse consensus zoals die ook in de vertrouwde wereld van mensen in de lokale gemeenschappen gemeengoed is. Toch geven mensen er meestal de voorkeur aan om niet de confrontatie aan te gaan met deze voorschriften, zolang de kerk zich onthoudt van active bemoeienis met het domein van het vertrouwde. De verankering van morele waarden in intermensele relaties blijkt belangrijker dan de vraag of zij consistent zijn op het
abstracte niveau van discours. Dit blijkt ook uit de manier waarop een pastoor als ‘slecht’ wordt afgeschilderd: niet omdat hij ongelijk heeft, maar omdat hij ongevoelig is en mensen schoffeert met zijn strikte toepassing van de regeltjes.

Voor de naaorlogse generatie is de kerk ook belangrijk, hoewel leden van deze generatie er meestal maar weinig mee te maken hebben. Niet als morele autoriteit, maar wel als tekenen van continuïteit met het verleden van hun ouders. In de manier waarop deze generaties over de kerk praten komt het woordje ‘toch’ heel veel voor: ondanks een brede waaiers aan bezwaren die zouden kunnen worden aangevoerd laten zij hun kinderen ‘toch’ dopen, en ‘toch’ de communie doen. Wanneer zij deze rituelen niet zouden doorlopen zou dat in de ogen van de vooroorlogse generatie een signaal zijn dat zij iets niet goed hebben gedaan. Daarnaast geven veel ouders van jonge kinderen aan dat zij hun kinderen ‘toch’ het besef van iets ‘meer’ willen meegeven, van de gewijde sfeer van rituelen en van ‘roots’. Ook voor de lokale basisschool is het belangrijk om het label ‘katholiek’ te behouden; een basisschool die niet katholiek is wordt niet gezien als ‘eigen’ aan de dorpgemeenschap.

Katholieke rituelen en de katholieke identiteit zijn dus belangrijke markeringen van het domein van het vertrouwde en van continuïteit met het verleden. Zij vervullen daarin een totaal andere rol dan die voorzien door de Katholieke kerk. Door het voortdurende belang van deze markeringen blijft ook de ‘angst’ en ambivalentie tegenover religieuze autoriteit bestaan, zoals blijkt uit de verhalen over ‘slechte pastoors’: pastoors zijn nodig, maar zij hebben ook de macht om deze markeringen van continuïteit met het verleden van een geheel andere, ongewenste betekenis te voorzien.

Van katholieke zijde wordt op allerlei manieren ingesprongen op de gelegenheid tot ‘missie’ die wordt geboden door de behoefte aan deze rituelen en de katholieke identiteit van scholen. In het pastoraal centrum huist een bloeiende boekhandel in religieuze en levensbeschouwelijke boeken en biedt allerlei cursussen om als katholiek actief bij te dragen aan het geloofseleven op school en de parochie. Deze cursussen blijken opnieuw, en voor veel deelnemers op onverwachte wijze inhoud te geven aan de term ‘katholiek’ (of eigenlijk, Christelijk). Dit wordt in hoofdstuk 6 verder besproken.

Daarnaast komen echter ook repertoire van alternatieve spiritualiteit op. In hun commerciële vorm spelen zij vooral in op de nieuwsgierigheid naar het ‘paranormale’. Veel mensen willen toch graag weten of er niet ‘iets’ is dat het leven bestiert. Dat deze interesse wordt bevredigd via commerciële kanalen kan begrepen worden vanuit de wens om de religieuze autoriteit waarnaar men zo nieuwsgierig is op een veilige afstand te houden. Het kan geïnterpreteerd worden als een manier om de eigen vrijheid de ‘kopen’. In een reatië van verkoper en consument heeft de consument geen enkele verplichting om de informatie van de verkoper over geledegraven, aura’s of overleden familie leden serieus te nemen. Hetzelfde geldt voor boeken, of die nu een christelijke of een New Age achtergrond hebben: men is nieuwsgierig naar de religieuze autoriteit waarover deze boeken spreken, maar hij kan op een veilige afstand worden gehouden, alleen op de eigen voorwaarden worden toegelaten in het domein van het vertrouwde.

In Zuid-Limburg, maar ook in andere streken in Nederland, bestaan nogal wat zogenaamde ‘spirituele verenigingen’ die voortkomen uit het spiritisme dat in de 19de
eeuw vanuit Engeland populair werd in de hogere kringen van de Nederlandse samenleving. Inmiddels is dit een ‘gezonken cultuurgood’ dat men op allerlei onverwachte plekken kan aantreffen in het lokale leven: in de artikelen en advertenties van de gratis zondagskrant, in de jaarkalender van het gemeentehuis, en in de dorpshuizen, schuren en huiskamers waar deze spirituele verenigingen hun bijeenkomsten organiseren. De popularisering van New Age die sinds de jaren negentig van de 20ste eeuw heeft plaatsgevonden vindt in deze verenigingen een vruchtbare voedingsbodem. Deze verenigingen hebben een sterk ‘ingebed’ karakter en trekken dan ook meestal mensen die sterk georiënteerd zijn op het lokale leven. De praktijken van deze verenigingen spelen dan ook vooral in op de problemen en zorgen die te maken hebben met familieleven en relaties, zoals het overlijden van dierbaren, of persoonlijke drama’s zoals zieke en werkeloosheid. De verenigingen worden met elkaar verbonden via de persoonlijke netwerken van de mediums, paragnosten en helderzienden die via deze verenigingen anderen onderwijzen en cliënten vinden. Ook zogenaamde paranormaalbeurzen en boekenwinkels vervullen een belangrijke functie in deze netwerken.

In hoofdstuk 5 wordt nader ingegaan op de processen van betekenisgeving in dit circuit door te focussen op een spirituele vereniging. Een aantal overtuigingen staat centraal tijdens de bijeenkomsten van deze vereniging, die echter nergens expliciet staan opgeschreven. Meestal worden mensen die doorvragen over hoe het nu echt zit verwezen naar de boeken van Blavatsky, Jozef Rulof of naar boeken van mensen die bijna-doodervaringen hebben gehad of op een andere manier verslag doen van hoe het er aan ‘gene zijde’ uitziet. Verder wordt er weinig belang aan ‘boekenwijsheid’ en doctrine gehecht: het is de bedoeling dat men via zelfstudie en het oefenen van paranormale perceptie tot meer inzicht komt. In grote lijnen komen de overtuigingen die centraal staan in de praktijk van deze spirituele vereniging overeen met het wereldbeeld dat ook in de context van Jomanda opgang doet. Het voortbestaan na de dood, reincarnatie en het bestaan van een goddelijke wereld die zich actief met mensen bemoeit zijn belangrijke bestanddelen.

Deze goddelijke wereld bestaat uit allerlei verschillende sfers. Mediums worden ook op deze manier beoordeeld: hoe hoger de sfeer waarmee ze in contact staan, hoe hoger de status van hun uitspraken. ‘Karma’ speelt hierin ook een rol, en wordt opgevat als het energetische residu van alles wat men ooit heeft gedaan, goed of slecht, in het verleden (inclusief vorige levens). Dit energie-patroon vormt de blauwdruk voor de ‘lessen’ die je in dit leven moet leren. De praktijken en overtuigingen van de spirituele vereniging zijn zeer inclusief. Men is ervan overtuigd dat alle religies uiteindelijk te integreren zijn in dit kader. Gelovigen die exclusiviteit benadrukken (er is maar één ware religie) worden afgedaan met ‘die zijn nog niet overer’.

Er was een aantal thema’s die steeds opnieuw terugkwamen tijdens de bijeenkomsten, waarover men steeds opnieuw morele uitspraken wilde doen: persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid, de grenzen aan de invloed die men over andere
mensen kan en mag uitoefenen, en de autoriteit van mediums. De nadruk op persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid gekoppeld aan het karma-begrip betekent dat mensen zelf verantwoordelijk zijn voor alles wat hen overkomt, zelfs wanneer hen dit schijnbaar door anderen wordt ‘aangedaan’. Blijkbaar is dat een les die men moet leren. De beperkingen van de invloed die men over anderen kan uitoefenen gaan vaak over conflicten in persoonlijke relaties of relaties op het werk: een vrouw kan haar man niet dwingen om haar standpunt over opvoeding van een moeilijk kind over te nemen, een man kan zijn buurman niet dwingen de muziek zachter te zetten. Het enige wat men kan doen is de eigen les leren. Ook al is men nog zo betrokken bij anderen, dat kan niet voorkomen dat zij hun eigen, soms domme, beslissingen nemen.

Het ideaaltypische pad dat men geacht wordt af te leggen om tot groter inzicht te komen begint vaak met allerlei vreemde ervaringen die ‘paranormaal’ worden genoemd, maar waar men in eerste instantie door in vervarring wordt gebracht. Vaak hangt dit samen met een tragische gebeurtenis zoals het overlijden van een geliefde of een familielid. Hoe meer men zichzelf traint in paranormale perceptie en spirituele zaken, hoe meer het normaal wordt om aura’s te zien of te voelen, voorgevoelens te hebben, dromen te dromen die iemands dood voorspellen of om te tekenen van gene zijde ‘door’ te krijgen.

In principe kan iedereen dus toegang krijgen tot ‘gene zijde’. In de informele gesprekken bij deze bijeenkomsten ging het vaak over de kwaliteit van paranormale percepties. De macht van mediums en hun neiging die te misbruiken waren ook veelbesproken onderwerpen. Rooddel en persoonlijke bemoeienis met elkaars leven waren normale, openbare sociale processen. Er werd van niemand ‘zuiverheid’ in de leer verwacht. Veel mensen kwamen evenzeer voor het sociale karakter van de bijeenkomsten als om iets te leren.

Een aantal mensen was echter wel overtuigd van ‘gene zijde’ en zij fungeerden als exequiën voor de anderen. De meeste van hen hadden zelf een praktijk als medium, paragnost, tarotkaartlegger of magnetiseur. Hoewel uitspraken van mediums in algemeen karakter hebben en objectieve informatie van ‘gene zijde’ zouden moeten doorgeven, gaat men ervan uit dat deze informatie altijd gekleurd wordt door de subjectiviteit en de kwaliteit van het medium. Rooddel en het uitwisselen van ervaringen met mediums en helderzienden waren dus een belangrijk controle mechanisme om de potentieel absolute macht van deze mediums in toom te houden.

Op basis van dit onderzoek zou men kunnen speculeren dat een deel van het publiek dat New Age artikelen koopt en van de diensten van boeddhisme van alternatieve spiritualiteit gebruikt maakt een veel meer letterlijke interpretatie op nahoudt over New Age en alternatieve spiritualiteit dan in de wetenschappelijke literatuur wordt aangenomen. In New Age literatuur blijken engelen, geesten en andere ‘bovennatuurlijke’ zaken vaak metaforen te zijn, projecties van het onderbewust, die voortvloeien uit de psyche van de mens. In deze kringen echter, wordt ervan uitgegaan dat engelen, geesten enzovoort een bestaan hebben onafhankelijk van de psyche van de mens. De morele waarden van spirituele evolutie door wedergeboorte en het leren van
'lessen' worden krecht bijgezet via quasi-wetenschappelijke rekwisieten zoals aurafoto's, grafiekjes van je persoonlijke energievelden, en machines. Het 'wetenschappelijke', feitelijke en vaak ook aanschouwelijke karakter van deze 'informatie' van gene zijde maakt het voor consumenten moeilijk om die zomaar naast zich neer te leggen.

In hoofdstuk 6 wordt beschreven hoe een pastoraal centrum van 'liberale' katholieke signatuur haar interpretatie van de bijbel en de Christelijke/katholieke traditie overbracht op cursisten en deelnemers aan discussiegroepen over de bijbel, de koran en beschouwelijke literatuur. Schillebeeckx was een van de belangrijkste invloeden op het discours van dit centrum. Een historicist-kritische, 'metaforische' lezing van de bijbel vormde de basis, in het begeleiden van deze groepen benadrukte de pastors steeds opnieuw dat er geen zekerheden en feiten zijn wanneer het gaat om geloof. Het vastklampen aan zekerheden werd ook op morele gronden afgewezen door zowel de pastors als veel van de deelnemers: dit zou kunnen leiden tot fundamentalisme, anderen de wet willen voorschrijven. De waarden van inclusiviteit en respect voor elkaar stonden voorop en werden in verband gebracht met de 'radicale boodschap' van naastenliefde die uit de evangeliën blijkt. Elke neiging tot 'moraliseren' door de deelnemers, door negatieve uitspraken te doen over bepaald gedrag of bepaalde fenomenen, werd sterk tegengewerkt door de pastors. Zij wezen dan op de sociale, historische of psychologische oorsprong van het gedrag of fenomeen om empathie en begrip te kweken.

Voor sommige nieuwkomers was deze metaforische lezing moeilijk te accepteren: 'vroeger' gaf de geestelijkheid iedereen er van langs die het waagde bepaalde zekerheden in twijfel te trekken, en nu mag men niets meer met zekerheid geloven? En als de verhalen in de bijbel niet letterlijk 'waar' zijn, wat zijn ze dan waar? Over het algemeen had het pastorale centrum zeer effectieve strategieën ontwikkeld om met deze 'erfenis van het verleden' om te gaan en het verband te laten zien tussen hun liberale, inclusieve en abstracte versie van het Christendom en het vroegere, 'letterlijke' en exclusieve katholicisme waarmee veel mensen zijn opgegroeid in Limburg. De liberale versie werd dan meestal voorgesteld als het resultaat van gegroeid inzicht. Dit betekende dat mensen die er een 'letterlijk' geloof op nahielden als 'ouderwets' en psychologisch onvolwassen konden worden afgedaan.

Met de realiteit van polarisatie in het heden ging men veel omzichtiger om. Wat wel en niet is 'toegestaan' volgens de moraal van de kerk was binnen het discours van het pastorale centrum een volkomen irrelevante vraag, terwijl die vraag toch steeds weer opkwam door uitspraken en het beleid van het bisdom en lokale pastoors. De overtuingingen, waarden en mechanismen van uitsluiting die door het pastoraal centrum werden voorgesteld als een deel van het verleden dat men achter zich moest laten, zijn immers een onvervreemdelijk onderdeel van het beleid van het bisdom in het heden, ook in het tijdperk na Gijsen. Maar het lag politiek uiterst gevoelig om het neoconservatieve beleid van het bisdom en haar priesters af te doen als 'ouderwets' en psychologisch onvolwassen, zeker gezien de toenadering tussen de twee polen die werd
gezocht na het vertrek van Gijsen. Dit was echter wel de implicatie van het discours op het pastoraal centrum en werd soms ook als zodanig geformuleerd door de deelnemers. De pastors zelf ontwaken deze conclusies, en gaven meestal ook niet aan dat zij slechts één uiteinde van het spectrum van liberaal naar (neo)conservatief vertegenwoordigen.

Het politiek correcte taalgebruik van het pastorale centrum liet weinig ruimte voor roddel, maar toch speelden roddel en stereotyperingen een belangrijke rol, vooral om de spanning dit de realiteit van polariserings opriep te mediëren. In dit verband was het stereotype van de ‘slachte pastoor’ opnieuw belangrijk: hoewel men op het niveau van het officiële discours niet kon stellen dat men ‘gelijk’ had, en de neoconservatieve stroming niet (er zijn immers geen zekerheden!) werd dit op het informele niveau opgelost door neoconservatieve priesters af te schilderen als ongevoelige, onervaren en belachelijk autoritaire mannetjes die niets van mensen en de wereld begrepen. Dit stereotype vertegenwoordigde het omgekeerde van de waarden die het pastoraal centrum voorstond.

Opvallend was dat de verhalen die de deelnemers uitwisselden over dit soort priesters niet over zijn ongelijk gingen op het punt van doctrine, maar eerder over zijn morele slechtheid, gebrek aan naastenliefde. De morele verantwoordiging die deze verhalen opriepen werd door de meer ervaren deelnemers gedeescaleerd door erop te wijzen dat deze priesters simpelweg psychologisch onvolwassen zouden zijn, niet de moeite waard om je druk over te maken.

In hoofdstuk 7, - de conclusie van dit proefschrift - wordt gesteld dat de oudere generatie terugkijkt op de veranderingen in religieuze praktijk in de lokale gemeenschappen in Zuid-Limburg als iets dat van bovenaf werd opgelegd, niet als iets dat voortkwam uit een benauwens waartegen men in opstand kwam. Ook onder jongere generaties werd de discrepantie tussen het morele discours van het bisdom en de sociale werkelijkheid nauwelijks expliciet genoemd, en meestal afgedaan met de opmerking dat de kerk nou eenmaal achterloopt. Desondanks werd de dreiging van uitsluiting van de sacramenten nog steeds beleefd middels de sacramenten rondom sterven en begravens.

Er heeft zich een fundamentele verandering voorgedaan in morele oriëntatie die zich niet heeft aangemeld op het niveau van discours of van argumenten die uitgewisseld worden, maar in de afbakening van domeinen tussen wat men beschouwt als het domein van de mens en wat men beschouwt als het domein van God en de kerk. Deze afbakening gaat vooraf aan het niveau van de concrete argumenten die uitgewisseld worden om zich in moreel opzicht te oriënteren. Het familieleven en lokale dorpsleven, het domein van het vertrouwde, staan centraal en vormen het uitgangspunt voor morele oriëntatie. Dit blijkt ook uit het gegeven dat rolpatronen in het gezin slechts gedeeltelijk zijn veranderd. Het domein van het vertrouwde is tevens het belangrijkste aanknopingspunt voor religieuze repertoirees.

De religieuze praktijken die hier worden beschreven bleken niet zozeer een antwoord te bieden op de beperkingen van het rationalisme of de spanningen die
worden opgeroepen door individualisering. Bovenal wenst men in de lokale gemeenschappen in Zuid Limburg een vorm van religiositeit die zich makkelijk laat voegen in het domein van het vertrouwde, die de waarden die in dit domein gelden ondersteunt en manieren biedt om te reflecteren op de problemen die zich in dit domein voordoen. De verhouding tot religieuze autoriteit wordt gekenmerkt door een sterke ambivalentie en de wens om de eigen vertrouwde wereld van familie en lokale gemeenschap te beschermen tegen inmenging van ‘vreemde’ autoriteiten. In duidingen van hedendaagse religiositeit is het belangrijk om deze ambivalentie ten opzichte van religieuze autoriteit niet alleen maar als ‘individualisme’ af te doen, maar te zien in het licht van de wens van een groot deel van de bevolking om een ‘ingebed’ leven te leiden. Hoewel individualisering en individualisme zeker belangrijk zijn, willen veel mensen toch gewoon een bepaalde continuïteit met het verleden, en verbondenheid met de directe omgeving, in dit geval de lokale dorpsgemeenschap.
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PaulVI

PiusXI

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