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Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

Huygens, E & van den Brandt, N 2024, 'Catholic Women as Subjects of Debate: Thinking through a Gendered Religio-Racialised Location in Flanders', *Religion and Gender*, vol. (In-Press), pp. (In-Press). <https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-tat00012>

DOI 10.1163/18785417-tat00012

ISSN 2589-8051

ESSN 1878-5417

Publisher: Brill Academic Publishers

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Catholic Women as Subjects of Debate

Thinking through a Gendered Religio-Racialised Location in Flanders

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Received 17 February 2023 | Accepted 9 February 2024 |

Published online 23 May 2024

Abstract

Through the analysis of empirical material that discusses women's positions in religion in Flanders/Belgium, this article shows how local religion/secular dynamics are co-constituted by issues of race and gender. Starting from the premise that religious women's (self-)positioning must be understood from a critical perspective on both secularity and race, we show how a.) mainstream secular and racialising discourses aim to discipline various religious subjects by using questions of gender justice, and b.) ethnically mainstream young Catholic women partially resist this by distinguishing themselves from religio-racialised others and producing whiteness. Based on our analysis, we argue for taking women's self-positioning towards religious others seriously as shaping a *gendered religio-racialised location*. Thinking through the production of a gendered religio-racialised location reveals how white Christian normativity depends on performativity and is a gendered construct. As such, we demonstrate the need for further investigations of the co-constructions of race, religion and gender focusing on the perspectives and positions of those normally excluded from these critical discussions, namely ethnic majority Christians in Europe.

Keywords

Religion/secularity – gender – religio-racialised difference – Christian normativity – Belgium

1 Introduction¹

Because I am really a [laughs], yeah, almost a feminist. I would be a very bad Muslim, I guess. [...] I would even be a worse Jew.

INTERVIEW WITH MARGOT

The above quote emerges from an interview part of Huygens' qualitative research on young Catholic women's discourses on, and practices of, femininity, sexuality and intimate relationships in Flanders.² As the interviewer, Huygens did not inquire about Margot's thoughts about individuals belonging to other religious traditions and communities. Margot's reflections on this came unsolicited, and somewhat as a surprise to the interviewer. When we discussed this quote, and similar ones emerging from other interviews, it got us thinking. What exactly happens here in terms of religious subjects' self-positioning? How to understand research respondents' claims about religious others in light of broader socio-political histories and contemporary developments? We explore these questions in the shared writing of this article.

Our first take on young Catholic women's claims about themselves in relation to other religious subjects and traditions is that understandings of religious others are entangled with histories of majority-minority relations, as well as with politico-social developments. Both in European public and academic debates, the position and experiences of Christian individuals and communities (whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox) are often represented in terms of religion/secularity dynamics. Starting from such a perspective means, for example, describing the present-day positions and experiences of Christians generally, and Christian women and LGBTQI+³ individuals particularly,

1 Both authors contributed equally to the analysis and writing of this article.

2 Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium exists both as a separate region and (language) community, with their own government, parliament and legal responsibility for domains such as education, culture and health care. Interesting to note here is that Flanders (in contradiction to the other regions) was much more influenced and shaped by Catholicism and Catholic culture (Gevers 2016).

3 We use LGBTQI+ as an inclusive term, emphasising that the addition of the + refers to the

as situated within a larger secularising society that develops specific notions of gender and sexuality. From this perspective, the gendered positions, self-understandings and experiences of Jewish and Muslim individuals and communities and those professing alternative spiritualities can comparatively be thought of through religion/secular dynamics. Such thinking has led to important insights amongst feminist sociologists and anthropologists that do justice to the religion/secular dynamics in which religious subjects and communities have to position themselves (Aune, Sharma, et al. 2008; Bracke 2011; Fedele and Knibbe 2020; Longman 2008). However, whereas it is useful to explore young Catholic women's perspectives and experiences in Belgium as situated in and shaped by a secularising society and vis-à-vis secular others (Huygens 2023), Margot's positioning as a feminist by marking herself as *not* Muslim nor Jewish, tells us that young Catholic women's subjectivity needs to be additionally thought of through a lens of religious othering.

The critical lens of religious othering we have in mind is one that reckons with histories and present-day mechanisms of antisemitism, postcolonialism, racism and Islamophobia that intersect with religion/secular dynamics in the positions and experiences of minoritised religious subjects and communities. The intersections of race, religion and secularity have been investigated by a number of scholars based in Western European settings, who have convincingly argued and demonstrated that religious minorities have historically been subject to processes of racialisation (Jansen and Meer 2020; Lentin 2020; Topolski 2020). While this line of inquiry often remains focused on the position and experiences of religious minorities only, we argue that it is worthwhile to explicitly consider ethnic majority Christian individuals and communities in Europe in terms of the constructions of race as well. How can we start thinking about this differently? How can we understand the perspectives of young Catholic women, who speak from a position constructed as a self-evident belonging to the religious and ethnic mainstream in Belgium? How can we think of, and assess, religion/secularity, gender and race as intrinsically related in women's self-positioning vis-à-vis secular as well as religious others in terms of gender justice? In this article, we seek to understand how local religion/secular dynamics are co-constituted by constructions of race and gender, and aim to bring together insights emerging from different existing contemporary fields of study in Western Europe.

Methodologically, the article draws on empirical material that emerges from the doctoral study of Huygens. For her PhD, she conducted forty-five ethno-

existence of other related gendered and sexual identities, subjectivities and positions, as well as to holding space for expanding perspectives on these.

graphic interviews between 2019 and 2021 with Catholic women between twenty-two and forty-four years old who are active in the Church in Flanders, either on a professional or voluntary basis. All of the respondents were white, highly educated and had a middle-class background. They all identified as heterosexual, except for two women. Most of the interviews were conducted at the interlocutors' homes. The main topics of these interviews pertained to women in the Church, intimate relationships and sexuality. Moreover, Huygens also observed instances of public debates about religion, secularity and gender. For this article, she selected few interviews, and a public controversy that took place during the same time the interviews were conducted. While the empirical data was collected by the first author, the analysis was a collaborative effort by both authors.

In this article, we bring the interviews in conversation with a public controversy. The controversy concerns a Flemish media uproar about women's position in Christianity;⁴ the interviews involve young Catholic women's self-positioning in conversations about gender justice vis-à-vis religious others. Our intervention lies in bringing together these distinct materials and topics that at first appearance seem unrelated. Positing *a relatedness* and thinking *dialogically* about the data, we develop a two-fold thesis, namely a.) that mainstream secular and racialising discourses aim to discipline various religious subjects by using questions of gender justice, and b.) that ethnically mainstream young Catholic women partially resist such disciplining by distinguishing themselves from religio-racialised others and producing whiteness. Based on our analysis, we argue for taking women's self-positioning towards religious others seriously as shaping *a gendered religio-racialised location*. Thinking through the production of a gendered religio-racialised location reveals the ways in which white Christian normativity is dependent on performativity and is a gendered construct. As such, the article calls on critical whiteness studies to be more attentive to religion by demonstrating the importance of scrutinising the interconnections and co-constructions of race, religion and gender. It does so by exploring the perspectives and positions of those normally excluded from these criti-

4 In this article, we specifically focus on Catholicism and Catholic women. In order to enhance the readability of the text, we use Catholicism/Catholic instead of Roman Catholicism/Roman Catholic. The differences between Christianity and Catholicism as understood in Flemish society fall outside the scope of this article, but it is interesting to note that references in public debates to Christianity, and the Christian heritage and roots of Flemish society, in reality mostly refer to Catholicism (see for example Dobbelaere (2010) for a historical overview of the shift from Catholicism to Christianity). The vast majority of self-identified Christians belong to the Catholic denomination. Protestant, Orthodox and other denominations are scarce (Vandewiele 2018).

cal discussions, namely ethnic majority Christians in Europe. Further research, we suggest, needs to focus on the contemporary and everyday performance of white Christian normativity and privilege by looking into moments where a gendered white Christian location is reinforced, challenged, deconstructed and/or re-imagined.

We structure the article as follows. In the first part, we discuss the politico-social context of Flanders in which our thinking and analysis takes place, and further our approach. In the second part, we introduce and discuss the empirical material: the public controversy and the ethnographic interviews. In the third and final section, we relate these by unpacking and further analysing the ways in which women of various religious traditions become subject of conversations about religion and gender justice in a context differentiated by gendered and racialised mechanisms of visibility. Importantly, these mechanisms are inherently embedded in histories and contemporary realities of normativity and privilege, which we will point out.

2 Religion/Secularity, Gender and Race

2.1 *Gendering Secularisation*

During the last decades Belgian society witnessed several processes of secularisation. Sociologists and historians have connected secularisation and individualisation to major shifts in the relationship between religion and politics, and to the liberalisation of majority-held norms and values since the 1980s regarding work and family life, sexuality and ethical issues (Dobbelaere, Elchardus, et al. 2000; Pasture 2004). In Belgium, secularisation is understood in terms of sociological statistics pointing to decreased levels of churchgoing as well as unprecedented low levels of trust in Catholic authorities, especially since the 2010 paedophilia scandals in the Belgian Catholic Church (Billiet 2017). In this context, young Catholic women, actively involved in local church communities, practice faith and contribute to the building of local communities against the grains of these large-scale developments. However, this does not mean these women find themselves in a void either. Instead, they find themselves embedded in the secularised structures and norms of Christianity. Catholic authorities and institutions are well established and fundamentally part of the functioning of society. For example, the federal government privileges Catholicism in the way it financially supports various officially recognised religious/worldview traditions; the Flemish government funds a vast network of Catholic schools and health care; Christian politics is an important factor in Flemish and Belgian federal coalition-based politics; and the national holidays are often

Catholic ones (Dobbelaere 2010; Franken 2016). Finally, they are embedded in a society that understands religion in a particularly Christian manner, which leads to other religious traditions and communities being viewed and approached from a Christian perspective on what religiosity entails. The result of a long history, Christians have created and relied on a sense of religious normativity while simultaneously producing various categories of non-Christian 'otherness' (Moyaert 2013; 2024).

Secularisation is often also considered in terms of decreasing influence of Christian politicians, policy-making and political discourse. Liberal-secular democracy presents itself as gendered and sexualised: in Belgium, secularisation and liberalisation are remembered as coupled with progressive activism for women's and LGBTQI+ rights. The 1970–1990 struggle for the legalisation of abortion took place largely as one against the power of the Catholic Church and the Christian-democratic political party (back then the CVP, now called CD&V) (Dequeecker and Roggeman 2005). Moreover, Christian politicians have long been reluctant to support LGBTQI+ legal rights and social and cultural inclusion, and embraced traditional family models and values instead. This reluctance has slightly changed in recent years towards a more inclusive attitude (Borghs 2015). Nonetheless, in the collective memory of especially socialist, liberal and humanist politicians, civil society, academics and individuals, progressive gender and sexuality politics have become largely associated with a struggle against Christian values, politics and power. The assumption of Christian conservativeness, reinforced by the recent rise of conservative social movements across Europe supported by Catholic authorities (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), makes young Catholic women in the eyes of many 'suspects' of embracing conservative values. The assumption that secularism and secularisation are invariably 'good' and religion is 'bad' for the rights, position, opportunities and equality of women and LGBTQI+ persons, even though this binary has been questioned by various scholars coming from different disciplines (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Huygens 2020; Mahmood 2005), remains a strong one in many sectors of Flanders, as well as other Western European contexts.

2.2 *Transformation of the Secular: Constructing Religio-Racialised Difference*

Against the background of the above referred to processes, the claim that Flanders has become a secularised society, which influences media discourse as well as the experiences of Catholic women, makes sense. Western European formations of secularised Christianity are, however, seldom read along ethnic-religious diversity and diversification. Sociologist Sarah Bracke (2013) argues to do precisely this, and establish critical considerations of how historical-

societal formations of secularism and secularity are mobilised within contemporary discussions about ethnic-religious diversity and multiculturalism. For one, Jewish communities have a long history in Belgium but are often considered socially and culturally marginal, and not intrinsically part of histories and narratives of secularisation. For example, (strictly) Orthodox Jewish communities in Antwerp are known for distinct lifestyles, languages and dress codes and a Jewish network of schools, shops and religious services (Abicht 2018 [1986]; Longman 2010). These orthodox communities are perceived as religiously set apart. Tellingly, the variety of Jewish communities in Antwerp and Brussels (Ari 2020) are equally seldom a matter of debate in narratives of multiculturalism. Ethnic-religious diversity and diversification in Belgium is often solely understood to refer to the increased presence and visibility of various minority communities since the 1960s. Ethnic-religious diversification is thus presented as a recent development arriving from 'outside' the nation-state. While migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have represented a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, 'religious diversity' is regularly associated with the presence of Muslims. Only comprising an estimated six per cent of the Belgian population, many citizens grossly overestimate the number of Muslims (Temmerman 2014). Muslim citizens' increasing visibility in all sectors of life, and their claims to equal rights and opportunities as well as the right to profess the Islamic faith outside the home or the mosque, are contested in various ways, such as through oppositional public and media debates (Zemni 2011), and local policy-making that demonstrates difficulties or unwillingness to accommodate Muslims' specific needs or practices (Coene and Longman 2008; Kanmaz and Zemni 2005).

In recent years, centre and right-wing politicians, and a range of opinion makers, have claimed liberal secularity in order to emphasise the intolerable 'difference' of individuals with Muslim backgrounds and Islamic communities (Bracke and Fadil 2009). As anthropologist Nadia Fadil (2020) puts it succinctly, 'Europe [...] has become secular as the "newly" arriving migrants were being depicted as deeply religious.' The visibility of Muslim women's piety has since the early 2000s become increasingly regulated and disciplined through local headscarf bans in various sectors of education and the labour market across Flanders/Belgium (Coene and Longman 2008). During recent decades, a secularist viewpoint has been increasingly embraced that perceives religion as merely a private matter belonging to the private sphere (van den Brandt and Huygens 2015). This viewpoint is arguably a demand for religious individuals and communities to shed their visible difference and thus assimilate. This is but one aspect of what has been called the 'Muslim question' (Fadil 2014; Fernando 2014; Norton 2013)—a conceptualisation that traces the problematisation of Islam and Muslims across Europe and seeks to apprehend the sys-

tematic character of this process (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020, 681). According to social theorist Sara Farris (2014, 296), the problematisation of Islam and Muslims recalls the 19th century construction of the 'Jewish question' and revolves mainly around two dimensions: the accusation of being an 'alien body' to the nation, and the demands of integration and assimilation. Notwithstanding slight variations in how this discourse is articulated across various European contexts, it is in many locations entangled with forceful calls, as well as concrete measures, to regulate, control and refashion Muslims' lives and subjectivities (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020, 681). Various scholars have argued that the integration and assimilatory forces of modern Western European nation-states have been intimately bound by an imperial knowledge order which hierarchises people and securitises Muslims (Amir-Moazami 2022; de Koning 2020), as such reinforcing and reshaping long standing representations and structures of *religious-racialised difference*.

2.3 *Shifting Attention: Constructing a Normative Religio-Racialised Location*

The flip side of the hierarchical construction of difference is the establishment of normativity and privilege. In this article, we argue for the importance of exploring how the contemporary secularised Christian norm is established, and how the religio-racialised self is produced. This is exactly the ambition of our discussion of the chosen empirical data: the analysis of a Flemish media controversy about women's positions in Christianity will explore the making of secular Christian normativity, while the exploration of young Catholic women's self-positioning towards religious others will reveal the production of a gendered white Catholic location. One way of talking about normativity and privilege is through the critical lens of whiteness. Important to note here is that we do not see whiteness as a fixed and static given, simply put, it is not (solely) about one's skin colour. Instead, our point of departure are critical studies that theorise whiteness as a location of structural advantage, a position that often remains unmarked and thus invisible, and a place from which those constructed as white see themselves, others and society (Frankenberg 1993). Whiteness is thus understood as a sociological construction that is intersectional, and can be negotiated and mobilised to cultivate new racialisation processes (Meer 2019).

European modern and colonial histories of religio-racialisation intersect with Christian traditions and theologies (Westerduin 2023). According to Gruber (2021), these histories have crucially resulted in a dominant belief in white Christian innocence. This innocence rests on the assumption that racial discourses are not an essential part of European history and its present, which

simultaneously allows to maintain a European self-understanding as anti-racist or post-racial (Goldberg 2015; Wekker 2016). The belief in white Christian innocence leads to forgetfulness about how historically, religio-racialised practices of exclusion have functioned as a constitutive element of nation-building in Western Europe, and that these constellations have roots in the theological knowledge practices of the Christian tradition (Gruber 2021). The construction of categories of non-Christian 'others', including the production of the 'Jewish question' and the 'Muslim question', has been constitutive for defining Europe as normatively Christian (Gruber 2021; Moyaert 2024; Renton and Gidley 2017).

Not living up to demands of religious and cultural assimilation, today, Muslims have become caught in a binary of the secularised norms of white Christianity versus the construction of the Muslim Other (Jansen and Meer 2020; Topolski 2020). Processes of making Muslims into figures of religious-racialised Otherness, however, thus rely on much longer European intellectual and theological histories that have constructed both Jews and Muslims into non-assimilable others and impostures, and Judaism and Islam as political and 'unfree' religions (Jansen 2013; Yelle 2020). Given the partly entangled histories of discourses about Jews and Muslims, antisemitism and Islamophobia need to be similarly discussed as entangled phenomena (Lentin 2020). Margot, who was quoted in the introduction, constructed an opposition between being feminist and being Jewish or Muslim. This, we suggest, can be thought of as (re)creating a link between Jews and Muslims—this time in the perception that Judaism and Islam are similarly 'unfree' religions that do not allow much space for feminist voices nor gender justice.

Being able to forget, this assumption of innocence, is undeniably related to privilege and advantage. We follow philosopher Sophie Lauwers' understanding of privilege 'as the concrete materialisation of structures of hegemony' (2023, 405) and see 'constellations of hegemony, exclusion, and privilege [as] always shifting and situation-bound' (2023, 406). In a similar vein, we conceptualise *white Christian innocence* as emerging from the production of a normative religio-racialised location, as we will show in our exploration of the selected interviews.

According to feminist scholar Sîan Hawthorne (2017), the privileged focus on gender by many scholars of religion and gender has marginalised sustained reflections on race and the postcolonial terrain, however much it challenged the androcentrism of religious studies. In a similar vein, political scientist Rabea Khan (2021) calls upon scholars of religion and race in Europe to start paying critical attention to gender. The above critical reflection on the dynamics and entanglements of religion/secularity, gender and sexuality, religio-racialised difference and white Christian innocence serves as the con-

text in which we situate our material. Our analysis thus heeds to Hawthorne and Khan urging us to think of religion, gender and race as intrinsically integrated mechanisms of power and differentiation.

3 Secular Christian Normativity: Sexist Bible Excerpts in a Catholic Church Service

This section explores the public controversy in Flanders that arose after a Church service livestreamed on public television. Each Sunday morning, a service of worship is streamed on the Flemish public broadcasting channel VRT. Often it concerns a Catholic service—Protestant, Jewish or Islamic services are rarely streamed. In 2018, at the end of the month August, a livestreamed mass took place in the abbey of Grimbergen, close to Brussels. During this service, excerpts from the Epistle to the Ephesians, written by Paul the Apostle, were recited. In this epistle (Eph. 5:22–23), Paul states: ‘Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour’. The next paragraphs explore the ensuing controversy, rather than the service or recited Epistle itself.

In the days after the service, politicians from different political parties responded to these Bible excerpts, and explicitly connected them to sexism and gender inequality. They stated that there should be no place for religious expressions that are hostile towards women on public broadcasting channels, and by extension in society at large. They invoked the principle of gender equality, and asserted that equality between women and men is a fundamental tenet of Flemish/Belgian society. For example, Sven Gatz,⁵ the Flemish minister of Culture, Youth, Media, and Brussels belonging to the Liberal party (Open VLD), claimed immediately after the Church service that there should be no space on public broadcasting channels for this kind of Church services. In a reaction in the Flemish newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, he elaborated on his point of view:

Of course, I do not support these kinds of statements. The fact that they descend from an old book, is no argument to release them on our citizens. This is out of date, and that they were broadcasted on VRT [the public broadcasting channel] is completely insane.⁶ (Huysmans 2018)

5 The politicians discussed in this section are former members of the Flemish or the Belgian government. At the time of writing, they run other political offices in newly elected governments.

6 All quotes are translated from Dutch to English by the authors.

He further explained his general opposition towards religious expressions on public broadcasting channels: 'It cannot be the case that VRT is used to send these kinds of things into the world, paid by tax money, under the guise of free speech' (VRT NWS 2018). Zuhail Demir, a politician belonging to the Flemish Nationalist Party (N-VA) and secretary of state for, amongst other things, Equal Opportunities, supported Gatz' opinion by tweeting the following: 'I totally agree. Let us immediately ban ALL people with such backward ideas' (Beel 2018). A few hours after the service, Gatz also shared the following on his Twitter account: 'Freedom of religion: ok. Freedom of expression: ok. But no outdated unfriendly statements towards women at the financial expense of the government please. (What if, for instance, an imam would have said this ...?)'. Interestingly, by referring to an imaginary imam, Sven Gatz implicitly confirms what is often considered to be the vexed relationship between Islam and gender equality—an assumption that has been comprehensively problematised by various scholars (Bracke 2011; van den Brandt 2019b; Coene and Longman 2005; Fadil 2014;). These responses to what were considered sexist Bible excerpts in a Catholic Church service livestreamed on Flemish public television thus attempt to draw the contours and boundaries of secularity and religion: the argument developed was that in a liberal secularised society, there is no place for religious misogyny in public media funded with taxpayers' money.

From here, we briefly look at who is able to 'talk back' (hooks 1989) in these kinds of controversies. In the days following after the Church service, articles and opinion pieces on radio shows and in newspapers further fuelled the controversy, questioning the degree of sexism of the Bible and rethinking its interpretations (see Beel 2018; Dillen 2018; Verberckmoes 2018). Theologians, persons working in the Catholic Church and Catholic clerics spoke about the assumed sexist character of the Bible, and by extension, Catholic teachings and beliefs. In general, they all indicated that this quote from Paul stems from a text of approximately two thousand years old, and should thus be approached in its specific historical, social and cultural context. Therefore, both the text's instructions, as well as its underlying assumptions, cannot be easily applied to current society, if at all. Similar theological advice pointing at the importance of understanding Biblical texts and passages as having emerged from a particular historical era was provided by a priest (Polfliet 2018) and published by Kerknet, the official website of the Catholic Church in Flanders. The fact that this elaborate discussion and exchange is able to take place points to the structures and norms of secularised Christianity: a liberal secularised society in which Catholic discourse has a privileged but also contested place, is able to talk back and shape the contours of the debate, and is able to be heard and understood.

However, in contrast to current public debates concerning Islam, it is remarkable that there were no Catholic women who spoke back to the Church service and the ensuing debate. When Islamic beliefs and practices are addressed in the media or political arena, Muslim women often claim the public forum to offer a counter-narrative, for instance by writing opinion pieces, or by making an appearance in television shows aimed at discussing current affairs. These individual Muslim women are often forced to relate to already existing framings about Islam and Muslims, which frustrates their act of talking back. Comparatively, Catholic women seem to not publicly speak out at all. This, we suggest, reveals an element of the gendered mechanisms part of the construction of secular Christian normativity: those who publicly participate in establishing and contesting the norms of secularised Christianity are seldom lay Catholic women.

4 A Gendered White Catholic Location: Perceiving Religious Others

This paragraph sheds light on few ethnographic interviews carried out within the framework of Huygens' PhD study (2023). During the interviews Huygens conducted, themes as Islam, Muslims and race were occasionally touched upon. We selected these interviews for further scrutiny, and suggest to read these spontaneous expressions about religious others as a way of producing a gendered white Catholic location. We are inspired by feminist scholar Éléonore Lépinard (2020, 81–126) who investigates debates on Islamic veiling as producing contextualised forms of 'feminist whiteness' through white feminists' opinions and attitudes about religious and ethnic minority women and feminists. In Huygens' research, most young Catholic women did not embrace the term feminism. We therefore consider *gendered white Christianity as a location of normativity and privilege* to be made through articulating and enforcing the religious-racialised boundaries of the legitimate female religious subject, and to be 'a location based on ignorance of its own constitution and on the creation of "deauthorized subjects"' (Lépinard 2020, 81). However, as a historically constructed location, gendered white Christianity depends on everyday practices for its reproduction and contestation. In this section, we look at how young Catholic women in Huygens' research gendered white Christianness in relation to other categories, namely through opinions and attitudes towards religious others. We argue that a gendered white Christian location is established through various discourses that perceive religious others always in a hierarchical relation to the self. This relationship to others is one in which issues of gender, religious-racialised difference and belonging are articulated.

During the interviews, one of the questions Huygens frequently asked was how respondents deal with the notion that religion is detrimental to women. This interview question engaged with scholarly debates on the religious/secular divide in relation to gender equality and the position of women in religious traditions and communities (see Cady and Fessenden 2013). Does the respondent agree (to a certain extent) with this statement, or disagree? Respondents answered in different ways. For instance, Julie responded by reflecting on how Islam and Catholicism are, according to her, represented in public opinion in diverging ways:

I rather think that, Muslims, Islam gives a much worse image, or that public opinion has a much worse idea of Islam than of Catholic women. And that even, yeah, that maybe the public opinion regards Catholicism as the 'good' religion when it concerns those kinds of issues.

Although Julie criticised public opinion about Islam, she also said that she felt Catholic culture was perhaps a little more lenient toward women's participation. When Huygens asked Margot, who was quoted at the start of the article, the same question, Margot replied that she disagrees with this statement:

Margot: No, I do not agree. There are so many strong female examples in the Bible, such as Ruth or Mary. I actually find Roman Catholicism one of the most female-friendly religious traditions. Maybe this is one of the reasons that explains my attraction to this religion. Because I am really a [laughs], yeah, almost a feminist. I would be a very bad Muslim, I guess.

Interviewer: Because you find gender equality important?

Margot: Yes. I would even be a worse Jew.

Here, the ambivalent response of Margot is striking. On the one hand, Margot asserts that Catholicism is a female-friendly religion, and that many strong female characters can be found in the Christian tradition. She indeed equates Catholicism with Christianity as if there are no other Christians or Christian traditions. Moreover, emphasising female Biblical exemplary figures enables her to draw attention away from misogynist church hierarchies. On the other hand, she equates Islam and Judaism with gender inequality,⁷ and does not

⁷ It is interesting to note that the public debate is much more preoccupied with framing Islam as incompatible with gender equality policies than Judaism. Nevertheless, there are—albeit rarer—examples of media controversies regarding the assumed lack of gender equality within (strictly Orthodox) Judaism.

refer to potential diversity within those religious traditions, nor to the potential existence of strong female characters in Islamic and Jewish holy texts or female role models in the Islamic and Jewish traditions. Thus, as she identifies herself as 'almost feminist', Catholicism is in her opinion the most fitting religion.

In another interview, Louise indicated that she fears the 'increasing Islami-sation' of society, and ponders how this will affect the position and rights of women: 'I really hope that they [Muslims] will not start dictating rules, and that you won't feel bad for wearing a mini skirt.' During the interview, the researcher brought up the media controversy that was discussed in the previous section, and suggested that perhaps these kind of examples fuel the idea that Catholicism, and by extension religion, is not compatible with gender equality. Louise elaborated on this by saying:

Yeah, that [sexist verses in the Bible] is true, but that's just history. I don't connect that to my religious beliefs. I rather think that, in earlier times this was the case and women stayed at home to care for the children, and had nothing to say. Does that have something to do with religion? No. I don't think so, I really don't associate that with religion. I do associate that with Muslims, they do that, because they just have those kind of norms and rules. If they come to our country, that's really ... women will [lose rights], I really hope not but ...

These narratives provide a glimpse into how these three respondents think of gender equality in relation to religion, in particular Catholicism and Islam. It becomes clear that they associate Catholicism with a much more positive attitude towards women, than they do with respect to Islam. In their point of view, Islamic beliefs and practices entail negative consequences for women. This negative judgement of Islam and Islamic believers came as a surprise to Huygens, as she expected more interreligious solidarity amongst religious (minority) groups in a secularising society. Not unlike other interviewees, all three respondents mentioned above indicated during the interviews that being young, female and Catholic is often quite complicated in current society, and that they at times felt frowned upon. For instance, some interlocutors indicated that they sometimes conceal their religiosity in order to avoid negative or harsh comments, or have felt that they had to defend their religious beliefs and practices. These experiences, Huygens expected, could make young Catholic women inclined to think that Muslim women might have similar experiences, generating a sense of interreligious generosity and solidarity. In addition, the Catholic Church in Flanders has made serious efforts in recent

years to install and establish interfaith dialogue and to work for better housing for migrants and refugees—individuals and communities who often do not belong to Catholicism.

It needs to be emphasised, however, that these negative stereotypes towards Muslims were only conveyed by a minority of the interviewees. Other interlocutors indeed called for more tolerance and solidarity in society, in particular towards refugees or victims of racism. These women find inspiration in the narrative of Jesus and in the Gospel to live a righteous life. This is exemplified in the following quote of Caroline: ‘That is what the Gospel represents: That you should help and support the weak. I think that is something that rarely happens nowadays in society.’ Hanne said:

I am very much inspired by my religion, for example in my attitude towards migrants or refugees. I think we should help integrate people, and be there for those who are having a hard time. And for me, that is very much informed by the Biblical story of Jesus. I see his life path as a sort of encouragement to have the same outlook on life.

By contrasting the specific opinions of these five Catholic women, we demonstrate the existing diversity in attitudes towards other religious traditions. While some women explicitly framed Islam or Judaism as a harmful religious tradition for women, the majority of the interlocutors did not agree with this line of thinking and plead for more solidarity. However, crucially, *all* interlocutors positioned themselves in a hierarchical relationship when talking about religious others. So, notwithstanding the discourse articulated was outright negative—which focused more on questions of gender justice—or one of hospitality—which focused more on charity and integration—all interlocutors positioned themselves as self-evidently belonging to the society in which they live, while they did not extend that self-evident belonging to others. The religious others invoked in spontaneous opinions during the interviews were variably irredeemable or dangerous misogynists, or they were those who are marginalised and need help. Religious others are never imagined as co-citizens who shape the national body and discussions about gender justice in a legitimate and equal manner to those who are positioned as embodying the secular/Christian self.

5 Unpackings: Talking Back in the Context of White Christian Innocence

In this final section of the article, we use the above two sections in order to summarise our findings, and take space to further analyse the concepts we have used; religion/secularity, gender, religio-racialised difference and a gendered white Catholic location. We do this by thinking through mechanisms of talking back and in/visibility.

From our exploration of the public controversy, which we consider to be a moment of the making of secular Christian normativity, an image emerges of Catholic women as a matter of debate positioned at the intersection of religion/secularity and gender. Ethnic majority Catholic women in Flanders are positioned on the 'religion' side of the religion/secularity demarcation that developed through processes of secularisation, and they are perceived as having to negotiate conservative structures and values regarding gender and sexuality. However, they do not have to reckon with histories of religio-racialisation that position them as never properly belonging to the nation. Even more, they have the 'luxury' of being forgetful about histories of the construction of religio-racialised differences, highlighting white Catholic innocence as a location of normativity and privilege.

This white Catholic location was revealed through an exploration of the interviews that focused on how young Catholic women's statements about religious others construct gender, religious-racialised difference and belonging. Huygens provided these women during interviews with the opportunity to respond to dominant discourses about the oppressiveness and injustice of Catholicism towards women, and women indeed took the floor to talk back. Talking back, according to hooks (1989, 8), can be described as '[...] an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless.' The exploration of the public controversy demonstrated that Catholic women are often rendered invisible in public debates. Or as Marjorie, one of Huygens' interlocutors, remarks:

[...] we are not heard. And we don't exist. If you see something in the media about Catholicism, most of the time it is men, priests, deacons, bishops. But a woman ... A woman is rarely given the floor to speak about religion, let alone a young woman, let alone a Catholic woman. If it's a young woman, a young religious woman, then it's a Muslim woman.

Marjorie here points to the peculiar position of practicing Catholics that often sits somewhat uncomfortably with processes of secularisation. Although Ca-

tholicism is still numerically the dominant religious tradition in Flanders, its practicing adherents remain invisible in the public debate. Furthermore, this quote points to a remarkable trend we have observed in the last couple of years. In public debates and controversies pertaining to gendered expressions and practices of religion, for instance wearing a *burkini* or *hijab*, several Muslim women have taken the floor. Through, amongst other things, opinion pieces, cultural productions and appearances in talk shows, Muslim women have attempted to counter the gendered, racialised and sexualised problematisations of Islam and Muslim minorities in Western Europe (van den Brandt 2019a). However, being part of the discussion does not mean Muslim women are able to contribute to setting the terms of those debates. Unlike Muslim women, Catholic women are much less visible as actors in public debates on religion and gender. Taking the floor to voice their own opinions about issues of gender and sexuality during the interviews with Huygens has challenged Catholic women's invisibility and voicelessness.

A number of these young Catholic women, however, not only made various statement about themselves and their own tradition, but also expressed their thoughts about religious others. They relied on different types of discourses, sometimes drawing on notions of Islam as a monolithic and 'unfree' religion, sometimes drawing on understandings of humanitarianism and Christian obligations to help those in need. The narrative that stood out particularly was the one of Margot, who remarked that as she is inclined to feminism, she would make a very bad Muslim or Jewish woman. Lumping together Islam and Judaism as two traditions that are monolithically bad for women, she draws on historically connected discourses that consider Jewish and Muslim masculinities and femininities to be improper (Boyarin 1997; Brunotte 2019; Ewing 2008; Scott 2007) and position Jews and Muslims as outsiders within/of Europe. This reinforcement of Jews and Muslims as gendered religio-racialised others that do not belong generates a white Christian location of normativity and privilege.

Being interpellated by a discourse that perceives Catholicism as oppressive towards young women, and being actively confronted with that perception by the interviewer, young Catholic women talk back by drawing on their complex experiences that enable them to see the nuances within, and be generous towards, the Catholic tradition. At the same time, some of them reiterate the problematisation of the presence of Muslims in Europe and the agency of Muslim women. Diverting attention to Muslim women, and to a lesser extent, Jewish women, as particularly oppressed, enables these Catholic women to underline the normality of their own experiences. However, also in benevolent discourses about religious others, positioned as migrants or refugees, a hier-

archical relation is constructed between those self-evidently belonging to the nation and those who are considered newcomers. Importantly, none of the Catholic women who spoke about religious others referred to them as self-evident equals in terms of belonging and citizenship. Exclusivist and benevolent attitudes to religious others are thus both part of 'the operations of construction and erasure' (Lépinard 2020, 81) Huygens' interlocutors rely on to produce and reinforce a white female Catholic self as their privileged social-religious location.

The talking back of these young Catholic women and their responses to social prejudices and attitudes is thus underpinned by complicated mechanisms of marginality, normativity and privilege. Lauwers (2023) argues that while Christianity is perceived differently than Judaism and Islam in discussions about Christian heritage in public debates, expressions of a too pious Christianity are regarded as suspicious as well. We cannot but agree with this observation. Huygens' interlocutors are often met with miscomprehension and the implicit (at times explicit) request to defend their Catholic identity and practice. Yet, this does not lead them to openly speak out in public controversies regarding Christianity and gender equality. Their silence in public debates matters, we argue, and should be regarded in connection to the privilege they benefit from embodying the norms of (secularised) Christianity. While these women are sometimes indeed seen as 'different' and their religiosity is silenced or ridiculed, their belonging to the secular/Christian national body is never questioned. As a result, Catholic women are able to partly deflect their religious marking by underlining and reproducing their white Christian location through constructing and reinforcing religio-racialised difference. In the process, they themselves emerge as the hegemonic yet invisible norm. The religious others they talk about are never imagined as co-citizens who shape the national body and discussions about gender justice in a legitimate and equal manner to those who are positioned as embodying the secular/Christian self.

An important note that thus needs to be made about embodying the secular/Christian self is that it needs to be gendered: the exploration of the interviews showed how lay Catholic women experience themselves being invisible in public debates about the role and place of religion in secularised societies. This dynamic is crossed and complicated by class, profession and religio-racialised difference: female theologians do get to 'talk back' publicly more easily, and Muslim women speak out in public debates about veiling but without being able to shift the terms of the debate itself. This note about the need to gender white Catholic normativity and privilege leads us therefore to argue that the women partially resist their experience of discourses invisibilising and

disciplining them by distinguishing themselves from religio-racialised others. In this dynamic of the production of a gendered white Catholic location, these women reclaim the power of self-definition.

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