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## **Rome was not built in a day. The commonwealths of Boltanski and Thévenot and the analysis of a debate on rights and religion in Flanders. (\*)**

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### **Abstract**

*On 30 May 1994 Pope John-Paul II declared that the discussion on ordaining women was "definitively" closed. Women could not become priests, the Vatican repeated for the "very last" time. This event stimulated an unprecedented commotion in the Flemish (Belgian) Catholic community; The laity voluntarily working in the Church even threatened to strike. The debate on feminism and human rights within the Roman Catholic Church erupted more fiercely than ever before. The laity reacted astonishingly radical and the bishops tried to hold a position in between the displeased Catholics and the Vatican. An analysis of the debates held on these issues in the Flemish newspapers, shows that the human rights discourse and the Vatican doctrine are worlds apart. Nevertheless, progressive Catholics try to create a new discourse that is able to combine both perspectives. In the article the interrelations between the several discourses are discussed, using the 'commonwealth model' of Boltanski and Thévenot. It is argued that their model is useful, but inadequate, because of the lack of attention to power and its ahistoricism.*

### **Keywords**

religion - rights - argumentation - Boltanski - Thévenot - Bourdieu - female ordination - Catholicism - Flanders

### **Introduction**

The claim that the Roman Catholic Church is not a democratic institution is almost a platitude. However, saying that the Roman Catholic Church anno 1995 is still as autocratic as for instance in the period of the First Vatican Council (1869) and the dogma of papal infallibility (1870), or even worse, in say the 17th Century, would of course be a serious mistake. After all, holding a 'heretic' view within the Catholic Church is no longer a dangerous (possibly life threatening) endeavor. Nowadays, many 'modern' Catholics 'no longer' (have to) accept the non-democratic

aspects of their Church. In fact, it seems to be that the laity even increasingly see themselves as having the right to participate in the governance of the Church and are rejecting more and more the magisterium as the sole source of authority (see for instance D'Antonio, 1994: 381). This is probably not surprising in the wider context of secularization, emancipation and the actual diminishing of political power of the Church. The Church, however, still has especial difficulty in confronting rational-legal demands (Aldridge, 1992: 50) and the wish for democratization. Being a sacred institution, it sees itself as the organization that promotes and secures 'the firm and just belief in Christ', in that it interprets the revelation through the Scriptures. From this perspective the Church *de jure* must always be right, which explains its inertia towards changes 'in the world outside'.

In Flanders(1), open protest from within the Catholic community regarding democratization and rational-legal demands used to be rather marginal. Probably because dissatisfied persons tended or to turn their backs to the Church, or decided to accept their situation in silence, limiting conflict mainly to an individual matter. But in the summer of 1994 and the winter of 1995 something peculiar happened: dissatisfaction finally resulted in extensive collective protest, which received a great deal of media coverage. In this article I will discuss what happened then, by examining the debates on the issue of female ordination in the newspapers(2). For this purpose I use the promising 'commonwealth model' of Boltanski and Thévenot as an instrument for discourse analysis. The relevance of this model for such a purpose will be critically assessed. In the first section I will present a general overview of the controversy on female ordination within the Flemish Catholic community. Section 2 presents the 'commonwealth model' of the French sociologists Boltanski and Thévenot, which will be used in section 3 to describe the different argumentative frames in the debate on female ordination. In section 4 a first assessment of the model of Boltanski and Thévenot is given, while section 5, reflecting on its lack of an explicit concept of power, examines its consequences in the analysis of gendered discourse. Finally, in the last section I argue that in this casestudy Bourdieu's perspective on debate analysis and sociology of religion can function as an important addition to the ahistoric commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot.

## **1. The Flemish Catholic community in turmoil.**

In the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, sent on 30 May 1994 to all bishops throughout the world, Pope John-Paul II wanted to end the debate on feminine priesthood once and for all:

*'Ordination, which hands on the office entrusted by Christ to his Apostles of teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful, has from the beginning always been reserved to men alone. (...) In some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate (...) Therefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance (...) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.'*

The contents of this statement was in no sense new, in the *Codex Iures Canonici* (1917) and in the declaration *Inter Consigniores* (1976) of Pope Paul VI it was clearly stated that it is forbidden to ordain women (Doyle, 1984: 28). The need for John-Paul II to come back to this subject, should be primarily seen as a reaction to the discussions in the Anglo- Saxon regions of the world. On the one hand it was a reaction on the decision of the Anglican Church to open ordination to women earlier that year, and on the other hand, it was a counterattack to rising demands for female ordination within the American Catholic Church.

On 31 May 1994 only the explicitly Catholic newspapers of Flanders devoted a small article, somewhere in the middle of the newspaper, to the papal apostolic letter. The next day Karel Dobbelaere, a famous sociologist of religion of the Catholic University of Leuven, made public to become a member of the Anglican Church in protest of the papal declaration. From that

moment on the issue became headline-news in almost all newspapers, Catholic as well as non-Catholic, and would stay that for two weeks. After and simultaneously to the decision of Dobbelaere, a vague of protest erupted in Catholic circles. A multitude of important Catholic groups and Catholic persons made their disappointment and protest public. In fact, almost the whole Catholic 'pillar' raised its voice against the papal declaration: the youth movements, the women organisations, the association of retired persons, the labor movement and the political party. Most important for the Catholic Church itself was perhaps the demand of the 'Interdiocesaan Pastoraal Beraad' (IPB), the highest counsel of consultation in the Flemish Church, that the Belgian Bishops would urge the Pope to reconsider his decision. The IPB even threatened with a unique strike of the laity working voluntarily in the Church. It was the fact the Pope's opinion on the subject was to be regarded as 'definitive' that caused particularly strong reactions. For example, in an open letter, dated 3 June, the Catholic Women Organizations wrote:

*'As the Christian Women Organizations of Flanders we have always loyally cooperated with the Church and its policy. But after reading the apostolic letter 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis', we are very disappointed, even infuriated. Not because the letter contains new elements on the vision of female ordination, but because every dialogue is unilaterally blocked and all believers should definitively accept Rome's viewpoint. In the past we have made clear in publications that as women we have great difficulty with the exclusion of women to ordination. Then we still believed in the path of moderation and dialogue. Today this hope seems void and this raises many questions for the future' (GVA, 3/6/94).*

The letter is part of a particular discourse<sup>(3)</sup>, which most protesters used in their public declarations. As a 'moderate civic discourse', it contains rational-legal elements, but also a theological vocabulary trying to attach itself to Vatican doctrine. On the one hand it is quite firm, clearly expressing discontent with the declaration of the Pope. The Pope is presented as being an undemocratic monarch, while the writers present themselves as loyal and open to dialogue (at least up till now). The papal declaration however, is the last drop that makes the cup run over and the trust put in gradual dialogue is put away. The letter indicates that the time has come to demand legal equality in the Church, in the same way that women achieved their emancipation in the secular world. There seems to be no room for compromises anymore. However, the text does try to stay in line with Catholic doctrine. The Bible is cited to illustrate the equality of man and woman and it is suggested that the 'Holy Spirit' itself might be working towards female ordination. These theological references are understandable if we look at the importance of tradition within the Roman Catholic Church. The doxic position of the Catholics is that the Bible inspires their doctrines and practices. The Bible is however, interpreted by the magisterium of the Church, which, allegedly, has been instituted by God for this purpose (Hopko, 1983: 176). The magisterium - which ultimately is embodied in the figure of the Pope - determines which changes in the Church are possible, whether they are in accordance with the Scripture, the 'spirit of Christ' and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Important changes in doctrine and practice are always the result of the work of the 'Holy Spirit', in order to come to terms with new historical situations. Within the existing Roman Catholic Church this is the argument that needs to be demonstrated: the ordinations of women is a contemporary dogmatic development required by the Lord and inspired by his Spirit (Hopko, 1983: 177).

Combining rational-legal demands with theological arguments, the (in the past often marginalized) protesters try to prevent being labelled 'progressive' or 'subversive'. As Jos Vandikkelen, president of the group for Human Rights in the Church, stated:

*'The closing of dialogue has hurt many people. It proves that there is still a surprising amount of vitality and involvement in the Catholic Church. More than we thought ourselves. It is not about a marginal group, but about a broad movement, that has nothing to do with the division*

*progressive-conservative'* (GVA, 4/6/94).

Amongst the protesters there are, however, also other discourses in addition to the 'moderate civic discourse'. Let us first consider the 'strong civic discourse'. In this perspective the issue of female ordination is solely tackled from a state-centered legal view. As, for instance, in the case of the (Catholic) professor of Law, Blanpain, who stated that excluding women of ordination is not in accordance with Belgian, European and international penal law. Another discourse used by protesters could perhaps best be labeled the 'traditionalist discourse'. Discontent is formulated euphemistically and the importance of loyalty and solidarity in the Church is stressed. The formulation of discontent is in fact so timid, that one often wonders if this really can fall under the category of protest<sup>(4)</sup>. An example of the traditionalist discourse is a statement from a Catholic commentator of the newspaper 'Gazet Van Antwerpen' who urged that the discussion should not be pushed to the limits and should not give credit to the '*anti-Church agitators*' (GVA, 4/6/94). This perspective used to be the 'normal' one within the Catholic community, also amongst those who now use a moderate civic discourse. Illustrative are the words of Agnes Pas, president of the IPB:

*'I am so disappointed because piety and loyalty to the authorities of the Church are so important to me. Everywhere I could speak about the Church I asked to people to having understanding and I pleaded for the slow way (...)'* (DS, 4/6/94).

Confronted with the multitude of protests the Belgian Bishops were forced to react. Their official statement of 7 June 1994 could best be described as using a 'conflict avoiding discourse', as an answer to the civic discourses. On the one hand, the bishops proclaim that they have to follow the judgement of the Pope, while on the other hand they stress that they take the feelings of some of the Catholics very seriously. The bishops made great efforts trying to claim that the word 'definitively' as used by the Pope, did not mean that all other opinions are from now on forbidden or 'heretic', but merely that this is the official doctrine of the Vatican and therefore the Church. They stressed that the papal declaration should not be interpreted as discriminatory or sexist and that critical thinking on the subject could and should go on, however, in combination with a 'believing hart and a practice of prayer' (HV, 8/6/94). They promised to inform the Pope of the protests within the Flemish Catholic Church.

In a later stage of the debate and to a lesser extent there were also people who unconditionally supported the Pope, using a traditionalist discourse. An often proclaimed opinion by them is that ordination cannot be claimed as a right, since it involves a 'calling' from God:

*'The Church is not a democracy, but a hierarchy. That is the will of Christ, Head and Founder. Priesthood is not a profession one can demand, but a holy calling. That is the Will of Christ, Head and Founder. Thank You Holy Father for your courage and wisdom. We fully support you'* (GVA, 11/6/94).

Some Catholics push traditionalism into reactionary statements: *'It is shocking to see how infuriated women (the modern Eve's) make a fuss in haughty drivel about the question if they can or cannot become 'priests''* (GVA, 11/6/94). Others see darker forces at play: *'It is the devil doing his job, but the Spirit will prevail'* (GVA, 11/6/94).

## **2. The commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot**

In their book 'De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur' the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot present a general sociological theory of processes of agreement and rupture, as alternatives to violence. Their theory can however also be used as an instrument for discourse analysis (Suurmond, 1992). Simplified, Boltanski and Thévenot claim that there is not one general (universal) form of agreement (rationality), but a set of distinct constellations to achieve agreement. People are capable of agreeing by referring to specific principles which they

regard as standing 'above' them and conceive as legitimate generalizations. There is, however, not one guiding principle or one monolithic set of principles, but a set of principles out of which people have to construct their justifications when confronted with different social situations. The thought that there are different forms of reaching agreement in different social contexts, echoes the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu (with whom Boltanski cooperated for several years), who states that the power of an argument is dependent on the power relation between speaker and audience in a particular setting. If participants in a debate subscribe the legitimacy of the position of the actor to utter certain statements, a discourse will be effective. The effectiveness of a discourse does not stem from the words themselves that are being uttered, but from the endowment with social power of the uttering person in a specific circumstance. For any actor this power only exists in certain circumstances and in certain fields(5). The force of an argument is to be understood as a metamorphosis of social power constellations (Maier, 1992: 9), and as such, as arbitrary as power relations in a particular social setting (field). As a consequence, a socially effective form of rationality for argumentation is always dependent on the rules (classification schemes) and power relations that are operate in a specific field in which an argument is made. To fit all this into a theory that explains reproduction of existing power relations, Bourdieu needs the hypothesis of an 'internal guide' (an 'incorporation of the exteriority'), which constrains (or even determines) the actions of people in a prescribed way. The concept 'habitus' fulfils this function, explaining why certain groups act in ways that produce their own (symbolic) power and other groups act in ways that sustain their own subordinate positions.

It is at the level of this hypothesis of an 'internal guide' that Boltanski and Thévenot depart from Bourdieu's perspective. Boltanski and Thévenot want to leave room for 'uncertainty' in the actions of people (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 267). Or, in terms of Bourdieu, they want to give actors the 'possibility' to get away from certain forms of symbolic violence and the 'dictate' of legitimacy. They assess that actors have the opportunity to alternate their frames of reference and can decide themselves what they want to see as legitimate in a particular situation. This is possible because of the existence of different 'worlds of worth' (commonwealths) that have their own schemes of classification and legitimacy and have an own constellation of objects and terminology. The authors distinguish the following set of commonwealths (6): the domestic commonwealth (in which tradition, hierarchy, piety and custom is central), the commonwealth of inspiration (in which an ideal can be reached by denouncing a fixation on worldly goods and taking risks), the commonwealth of reputation (in which fame and success are important), the civil commonwealth (in which equal rights prevail and success can come through representation), the market commonwealth (in which the possession of goods and competition is important) and the industrial commonwealth (in which control, technique and effectiveness prevail). Each of these commonwealths is derived from traditions in political philosophy which make explicit claims about the basis of a just and universal order(7). Boltanski and Thévenot argue that they are used in daily practice in a fragmentary and indirect way by people as they (dis)agree with one another (Dodier, 1993: 558).

All these commonwealths have their own 'grandeurs' - a normative and distinctive scheme of classification. The argument is as follows: in order to be a legitimate order, the superior principle in a commonwealth must be one linked to a common good. Every human must have access to the commonwealth and is considered as someone having to profit from that particular common good. Those who live by the principles of a commonwealth, give up their egoism (immediate pursuit of pleasure) in order to assure the establishment of the common good. They are by virtue of the distinctive classification scheme 'rewarded' for this with 'greatness': they are considered and can consider themselves as 'great'.

Models of justification which do not have a principle of common good and which block access to the commonwealth for certain groups of people (for instance by denying that they are human or human enough), can not be considered to be 'genuine' commonwealths. They cannot be seen as one of the broad types of argumentation which bring agreement without resorting to violence. As

an example of such a illegitimate order, the authors refer to the model of eugenetics and national-socialism (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 103-106).

Adopting an ethnomethodological attitude, Boltanski and Thévenot stress that actors use and construct for themselves one of these social orders as the legitimate one in several social situations, as they see it fit. In fact, it is even necessary that actors have this capability of confronting new situations in a flexible way (adapting themselves to different social orders and choosing new frames), if they do not want to be labeled insane (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 182).

In a 'test' (a situation in which something needs to be justified), actors take a stand using a particular commonwealth. Such a 'test' becomes a conflict when actors criticize (each other's) argumentation from one commonwealth with a counter argumentation framed in another commonwealth. In this process they try and mobilize objects<sup>(8)</sup> to indicate that they have a 'sense of common order', or in other words, to prove that they refer to the proper commonwealth apt to the situation. If actors cannot agree on a legitimate 'test' of their environment, because they keep referring persistently to different commonwealths, a temporary compromise might help to solve that problem for the moment (Maier, 1992: 13). They then need to agree on a common good, without however letting prevail a specific grandeur (means of symbolic power) of one of the commonwealths of the different actors in conflict. As a consequence, the compromise is always vague and fragile. A stable compromise is only possible when the creation of a new commonwealth is undertaken, which is a very difficult endeavor.

### **3. The clash of the commonwealths**

In the overview of the debate on female ordination, I stated that there were two discourses that had a rational-legal component: the moderate civic discourse and the strong civic discourse, in which words like 'rights' and 'democracy' were of central importance. However, there is more to it than mere systematic usage of a particular vocabulary. The specific vocabulary goes hand in hand with particular forms of action: 'open' letters, petitions, protest marches and the threat of strike. In this way people are acting and justifying their actions in what Boltanski and Thévenot call the civic commonwealth. The aim is justice and equal rights for all; the means are collective and public action.

The traditionalist discourse, which stresses the importance of tradition and hierarchy, can be seen as the antipode of the civic discourse. It is in fact against the domination of ideas and practices of the Vatican supported by the traditionalist discourse, that protests (in the shape of the civic discourse) were made. In this case we also are confronted with more than just words: the traditionalist discourse is accompanied by piety and prayer. Clearly, the discourse is part of what Boltanski and Thévenot call the domestic commonwealth, which uses the family as a metaphor. Crucial within the domestic commonwealth are the principles of hierarchy and tradition. Superiority and dignity - grandeur - stem from authority, subordination, respectability, loyalty, confidence and discretion. Egoism should be rejected by striving for harmony and obeying duties. In sum, the domestic commonwealth is a modern variant of a feudal order and fits remarkably well the image of traditional Vatican hierarchy and Catholic preconciliary norms and values. So well, in fact, that where the authors used the family as metaphor to describe this model of agreement, they had probably better chosen the Catholic Church as example, and named it the 'corporatist commonwealth'.

As Boltanski and Thévenot state, one should not be surprised to find the civic commonwealth in conflict with the domestic commonwealth, because the former explicitly is an attempt to break the importance of personal dependence in social relations and the acquisition of power in the latter (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 309). From the civic commonwealth one denounces what is called 'authority' in the domestic commonwealth as being authoritarianism, as we saw clearly in the reactions of Catholic protesters against the Pope: *'The fundamentalistic interpretation of the Bible by the Pope is nonsense'* (DS, 4/6/94). This 'denunciation' - showing what 'really happens'

and was hidden up till then - according to Boltanski and Thévenot (1991: 269) is a typical figure to criticize a 'grandeur' - an argumentation or action that is esteemed as the best one - of one commonwealth, by replacing it with one from another commonwealth.

In an article on discourse on women in the Anglican Church, Aldridge (1992: 55) stressed the strategy of drawing a sharp 'Durkhemian' distinction between the sacred office of priest and the profane status of lay person, to resist the demands of women on the subject of ordination. Sacred priesthood is defended against pollution from the profane realm. It is stressed that the Church is the Body of Christ, not a bureaucratic organization and the discourse to defend this is explicitly theological. Exactly the same strategy can be found in the debate amongst Flemish Catholics to justify the exclusion of women from ordination. Since wanting to become a priest presupposes a divine calling, the demanding of ordination is considered to be desecrating. This argumentation is a very effective way to tackle the reasoning in the civic commonwealth with a smart usage of elements of the commonwealth of inspiration, that faithful women cannot avoid accepting. Central to Catholic religion are the idea of the grace of God and the idea of spiritual contact between a believer and God (for instance the importance of prayer). These sacral experiences cannot be demanded or automatically achieved: they come through inspiration. In order to become a priest, it is presupposed that one had a genuine calling by God. Therefore it does not make sense to base an argument for female ordination solely on a civic discourse: you cannot demand anything from God.

As I showed earlier, the civic discourse (stemming from the civic commonwealth) was only used by some participants in the debate in its 'pure' form. Most protesters in fact used a mixture of a civic discourse with a theological discourse, which I called the moderate civic discourse. It is precisely this alternation of a civic discourse and a theological and inspirational discourse which provides a way out of the reasoning that stresses that ordination is a calling, not a right. The strategy is twofold. On the one hand, the Bible is cited to illustrate the equality of man and woman. For instance St. Paul is cited several times in a passage (Gal. 3, 26-28) where he for once explicitly stated that there is no difference between man and woman in the eyes of Jesus. Furthermore, the theological argument that Jesus only chose men to be his apostles, is criticized by referring to the fact that those apostles may have been men, but were also married Jews (Torfs, 1985: 41). On the other hand, the tactic of referring to inspiration and grace of God is used in a counterattack. As was stated earlier, Catholic doctrine stemming from tradition can be countered if changes are demanded by the 'Holy Spirit'. Therefore, the question is raised by the protesters if the Holy Spirit itself is not working towards female ordination. It is suggested that emancipation is a '*sign of the times*' of '*Gods Spirit*' (GVA, 3/6/94). It is stated that the protest stems from '*a genuine love for the Church and faithful to the Holy Spirit*' (GVA, 3/6/94), or even is '*deliberately set up by the Holy Spirit*' (Visie, 10/6/94). Some refer to the Holy Teresa of Avila who lived in the 16th Century and is regarded as one of the main examples of people who under the grace of God came to mysticism. What happens here is an attack on the Catholic doctrine and the traditionalist discourse by blaming actors that because they are trapped in the force of tradition (stemming from a domestic commonwealth), they no longer can see the 'signs of God', that they no longer are in line with the necessary ingredients of religion coming from the commonwealth of inspiration.

The bishops created what I called a conflict avoiding discourse in the course of the controversy. They stress that it is their 'mission' as bishops to uphold the official doctrine of the Church, but on the other hand claim to understand the criticism that was expressed. They refuse '*the way without salvation*' (HLN, 8/6/94) of explicitly choosing one of both sides in a manicheistic way. In an amusing manner they try and explain that when the Pope uses the expression 'definitively' that means something else than when ordinary people use it: '*In modern ears the same word can sound as if it is a forbiddal of speech and thought or an attempt to silence people*' (HBL, 8/6/94). The bishops see it as their primordial duty to inform the Pope of the pain and dismal under parts of the faithful and end their official statement with the curious passage that '*loyalty does not have*

*to mean a stop on creativity'* (GVA, 8/6/94). The bishops try here to achieve what Boltanski & Thévenot call a compromise in case of conflicting commonwealths. For sake of the common interest (which is avoidance of too much polarization leading to a schism), they do not try to 'solve the conflict', but suspend the question of justification. Being a typical compromise, their discourse is not completely defensible in 'good logic', but it beats every other solution (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 339). Actors, in a situation of compromise, (can) still stay 'loyal' to their own commonwealth, which makes it an intrinsically fragile figure. The conflict can erupt every moment once again if someone 'denounces' the compromise as merely 'compromising' - in the other meaning of the verb.

#### **4. The consequences of a sociology of criticism**

So far, so good: the commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot has been useful to frame the civic discourse and the traditionalist discourse in broader perspective, relating them to specific norms, goals and means. This exercise nevertheless, stays quite trivial, because it is hardly anything more than stressing that there are two lines of reasoning about rights in the Church: the hierarchical- monarchical perspective in which all authority and power are in hands of the Pope and the bishops and stem from God, and a more democratic perspective in which there is a plea for equal rights and negotiation. It is interesting to see how a theological discourse is used by the protesters to confront this divide and how the bishops try to 'put out the fire'. But here again, the ideas of Boltanski and Thévenot about commonwealths and compromises only seem to be productive to describe the debate in quite a trivial way.

Why is it necessary to make this point exactly? After all, the model is useful when giving an apt description of the debate: in one (imaginary) space all different perspectives of justification can be confronted with each other (Duyvendak et alii, 1992: 17). The triviality is then maybe a sign of good 'compression' of the debate. But what the model then does not allow to do, is to formulate an account of what 'really' happened, despite justifications actors might have given. This is not surprising given Boltanski and Thévenot's claim the sociologist is no better in denouncing illusions than any lay person she might be studying. Indeed, any form of argumentation always functions in the same way: it is justifying statements from one commonwealth and denouncing those of others (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991: 59). The authors want to reject the idea that 'genuine criticism' is a prerogative of the sociologist and, in fact, claim she should better stop giving criticism. This statement is difficult to accept for a sociologist, because most sociologists are 'denouncing' all the time: i.e. claiming to know what happened 'in reality'. Assessing that the commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot is only useful for a 'trivial description' is then perhaps an indication of my own difficulty in giving up this sociological hubris.

The radical epistemological choice Boltanski and Thévenot made, leads to the conclusion that they did not create a critical sociology, but rather a sociology of criticism (Dodier, 1993: 568). I agree that sociologists often - if not always - struggle with the problem of a serious lack of modesty, while watching down on 'the actors down there', as if they were the two old men on the balcony in the Muppet- show commenting the program - or God if you want. However, the obvious question then is what claims a sociologist is then still allowed to make. All she can do, is reconstruct her own version of the different argumentations and then confront actors with their own logic, without choosing sides (Duyvendak et alii, 1992: 17). According to Dodier she can no longer self-assurantly believe in a single world (her own theoretical construct), but can only demonstrate the difficulties of moving from one world into another (Dodier, 1993: 568). But do we need a sociologist for that, one might ask.

Argumentation and justification are in the theory of Boltanski and Thévenot still framed to a large extent in an agonistic perspective. Justifying is a battle with words, a competition of commonwealths. However, Boltanski and Thévenot are not Bourdieu. The analyst can describe this struggle, but she cannot and should not explain it in terms of an ever perpetuating power

game. Otherwise social science cannot distinguish violence from other human actions and will keep neglecting genuine love - 'agapè' - , a phenomenon that Boltanski claims to find traces of in empirical research (Boltanski, 1990). In sum, Boltanski and Thévenot claim we win a lot by taking actors and their justifications seriously and not always keep on looking for the ghost of power. But what do we lose by tacking such a perspective? Should we let go a critical sociology so easily and opt radically for a sociology of criticism?

## 5. Gendered discourse

Let me return to the debate on female ordination. It is irresistible to claim that we are not confronted here with a mere matter of diversity of argumentative frames, but with a question of power and more specifically a question of power relations between men and women.

The model of Boltanski and Thévenot can shed light on the discussion pertaining to rights and democracy in general within the Church, but cannot give an adequate perspective on the gendered discourse on clerical profession that we find in the more specific discussions pertaining to female ordination. It is quite obvious that the traditional Catholic Church is not very women-minded. Gendered inequalities are common in Catholic discourse. Often Catholic doctrine has been and is being used to legitimate women's subordination. Although the cult of Virgin Mary secures feminine symbolism in the Catholic Church, discourses directed to the faithful in general tend to ignore or marginalize women. A striking example was reported by Time-magazine who claim that in an original proposed English version of the catechism all gender-neutral terms were changed into masculine words (*for instance: 'everyone' was rewritten as 'all men'*) (*Time*, 13/6/94). Last but not least the Church is an institution where the rules of the game are de facto determined by men.

The fact that women cannot be ordained as priests, is justified on theological arguments, of which one of the most important is that Jesus did not choose any women amongst his apostles. Other theological arguments are that St.Paul denied public ministry to women, that the priest is to represent Christ in sacrament and absolution and that the priest therefore must be male and that the fact of 2000 years of male tradition is the evidence of God's leading. How important are these justifications and why do conservatives hold on to them?

In an article on attitudes within the Anglican Church Nason-Clark (1987) investigated the relative contribution of such theological positions compared to the general opinions on rights of women in Western society accounting for the resistance to the ordination of women. Her conclusion was clear: sexism is a much more important explaining factor than theological position (Nason-Clark, 1987: 271). Of course, Anglicans are not Catholics. However, there is good reason to believe that for Catholics sexism is also a more important factor than theology regarding attitudes on female ordination. Moreover, it could even be regarded to be even more important amongst Catholics. One indication for this can be given by referring to the fact that Anglican clergyman are allowed to marry, Catholic priests are not.

If we accept the radical epistemological position of Boltanski and Thévenot I spoke of earlier, we are confronted with a typical form of sociological hubris in which we denounce a 'so called' theological argumentation as 'in fact' being simple sexism. But are we willing to give up this kind of hubris so easily ? For many researchers (and 'ordinary people') sexism is a 'reality', just as racism is a 'reality'. Not surprisingly Boltanski and Thévenot did not choose to extend their epistemological views into an extreme amoral variant of postmodernism which would allow legitimation of sexism or racism as 'just another commonwealth' actors legitimately can choose from to justify actions<sup>(9)</sup>. Sociologists (and other persons) still can still select those values which are illegitimate. Their argument is as follows: a genuine commonwealth, is distinguishable from weaker political communities, when set against a list of axioms. Racism (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991: 104) and sexism (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991: 98) fall out of the list of commonwealths because they cannot pass the test of the axiom of common humanity. They are not legitimate orders of justification because they exclude participation of particular groups of

humans to a common good. This view raises some problems. What Boltanski and Thévenot rightly distinguish as illegitimate frames of argumentation are models of justification people do actually use. Obviously the authors take the liberty here of denouncing those views, while in other cases they want to completely 'take serious' the justifications of 'ordinary' people. This is a clear ethical stand, implying that there is after all one general frame of justification linking all (legitimate) commonwealths: the ultimate superiority of a common good and of humanism, not only within each commonwealth, but above all the commonwealths. Thus after all is said and done, the sociologist can do more than just collecting a set of equal narratives and describe laymen's denunciations: she can distinguish legitimate justifications (out of the commonwealths) from illegitimate justifications, if participants in the debate forgot to do so. Racism and sexism can still be tackled. But how useful is the approach of Boltanski and Thévenot for such an endeavor? Primary attention goes to justifications actors give (mostly in case of conflict). Seeking explicit racist or sexist justification could then be fairly easy. But what to do with sexist or racist actions of which participants deny that they are sexist or racist and that are being defended with justifications out of a legitimate commonwealth? Are we to distinguish these from explicit racism and sexism? What, for instance, do we do with the constatation that usage of the domestic commonwealth often has the (possibly unintended) consequence of creating (gender) inequalities? Is the domestic commonwealth then still to be regarded as a legitimate frame of argumentation? Or are these inequalities unimportant for the sociologist, becoming only important when they get 'translated' in a justification or a denunciation?

## **6. The religious field**

Saint Augustine, Bossuet, Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith and Saint Simon had the time and inclination to spell out conceptions of just social orders, of which a sociologist can nowadays find traces in argumentations of modern (European) people by doing empirical research (Dodier, 1993: 558). This is one of the main arguments Boltanski and Thévenot put forward. Their contribution, however, does not deal with the question how the ideas which these political philosophers trusted to paper have evolved up till now or why they are being used as the legitimate frames of argumentation in modern Europe. They 'simply' want to use the theoretical framework they constructed from the empirical finding that people use (in an alternating and fragmented way) different frames of justification, once coherently written down by famous philosophers, to do more empirical research. This empirical research concerns short sequences of conflict and agreement in different situations.

As Dodier (1993) emphasized, the assumptions of Boltanski and Thévenot raise many questions on history. How can a common reservoir of justifications be reproduced? How is a common historical heritage internalized? These questions have to be considered, because they are related to the basic presumptions one has to make, if one wants to follow the argument of Boltanski and Thévenot.

Furthermore, particular attention should be paid to the claim that agreement which gets its resources in a 'pure' way out of one commonwealth is more stable than a compromise which has to link several commonwealths. Is this remarkable hypothesis to be regarded as a historical 'fact', a recurring phenomenon? Can we give so much weight to the significance of internal coherence of justifications in explaining stable agreements (and thus stable associations)? Can Boltanski and Thévenot afford this mix of description and explanation? We should, as Dodier (1993: 569) suggested, consider here how the (re)construction of (new) apparatuses forces changes in reference to principles of justice. Unless of course, Boltanski and Thévenot want to claim that it is solely the search for argumentative coherence which explains social change - which they do not (10). I am afraid for the theory of Boltanski and Thévenot that this raises questions which they in fact wanted to stop asking: How can particular actions of people be explained? How does social change come into effect? How do institutions evolve? (And how does all this affect justifications?) Answering these questions probably necessitates concepts such as power, social

struggle and groups (which have 'internal guides'), which Boltanski likes to denounce in Bourdieu's oeuvre.

Returning to the analysis of the debate on female ordination, I will leave unanswered the, albeit interesting, questions pertaining to long term evolution of arguments in the debate, and the hypothesis on stable argumentations which stay in one commonwealth. However, I would like to suggest that the stability of the argumentation (primarily grounded in the domestic commonwealth) of the Vatican on the issue has in my opinion everything to do with the social relations within the Roman Catholic Church: from a historical perspective offering counter argumentations to Vatican doctrine became possible only recently. At the end of this paper I will deal with the issue of power and the dialectic relation between debate and social context from a modest synchronic perspective. I will first reconsider the effort of the bishops in the debate on female ordination in Flanders to use a conflict avoiding discourse. Is it enough to study their justifications as being an attempt to compromise the commonwealths used by progressives and those used by traditional Catholics? Should we not see their discourse primarily as a reaction to the protests of discontented Catholics which threatened to undermine, not only the legitimate schemes of argumentation within the Catholic Church, but also the existing power relations? Or, even worse, were the relations of power not actually changed already and did this not force the bishops to create this peculiar compromising discourse?

In Bourdieu's perspective these questions should be tackled by referring to the religious field, which determines both the form of interactions of participants in the field as the representation agents may make of these interactions (Bourdieu, 1987: 121). In Bourdieu's approach the religious field is organized around 'requests' for legitimation by privileged classes and status groups and for compensation by the underprivileged (Robertson, 1992: 152). Following Max Weber, Bourdieu claims that the laity not only expect justification of their existence form religion, but also justification of their existence as occupants of a particular social position in the social structure (Bourdieu, 1987: 124). It is only by constructing the religious field as a set of relations between positions that interactions and strategies of actors can be explained (Bourdieu, 1987: 121). Crucial in this reconstruction of the religious field is the attention that must be given to the struggles for the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of religious power. Typical for the Roman Catholic Church is that priests are relieved from the necessity to win and regain religious authority - as for instance a prophet would have to do -, because they derive their authority from their function, not per se from their own religious action. The Church indeed, has succeeded in becoming a more or less permanent institution laying claim to a monopoly of the administration of the rewards of salvation as an institutionalized bureaucracy of functionaries (Bourdieu, 1987: 132). Doctrine and codification is essential to uphold religious authority. Bourdieu claims that in order that a ritual functions as a ritual, it should first be given legitimacy and be seen as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1982: 115). The stereotyped symbolism exactly is in existence to show that the priest is not acting out of his personal name and out of his proper authority (Bourdieu, 1982: 115). Bourdieu from this perspective looks at the crisis of liturgic discourse and tries to explain the resistance of conservative believers and priests towards liturgic modernization: they no longer perceive the liturgic ritual as legitimate when it can take several forms within the same Church. The priest is no longer automatically a legitimate actor, when other priests claim the same authority from the same Church, but perform other rituals - or wear other clothes, or are women, for that matter. The crisis of religious language is foremost a crisis of social relations (the collapse of a system with a strong Church and a meek laity, accompanied by a fixed set of rituals), which constituted the symbolic effectiveness of the religious language, and is not to be reduced to a crisis of a universe of religious representation (Bourdieu, 1982: 119). Of course, we can extend the same argument the other way around: progressives within the Church no longer see the fixed ritual as legitimate, because they no longer accept existing social relations within the Church, nor the Vatican doctrine, nor the justifications that are given for existence as occupants of a social positions. De facto liturgy is being modernized ever since Vatican II in

1962, which resulted in an awkward situation within the Church. On the one hand there is the crisis of religious language amongst conservatives who do not want to accept changes (and for whom changes undermine legitimacy), on the other hand there is a crisis amongst progressives because only by changes, they can still find sense in the rituals. Apparently progressive who stay loyal to the Church want a fixed ritual, but not the traditional one. Without a fixed ritual (and fixed social relations constituting it), the 'magic' effectiveness of religious language is impossible. The existing social relations are however not accepted by progressive Catholics. In this sense, the crisis within the Church is indeed, a social one, that will not be resolved easily, if ever.

The bishops are in this case forced to take a compromising position: if they do not, the Catholic Church will or lose further religious authority amongst conservatives or amongst progressives. In the long run, of course, a new stabilization of liturgic ritual and official doctrine will be necessary. This will probably force the Church to further modernization (risking further schisms like the one of the conservative bishop Lefebvre) if it wants to halt secularization amongst younger (more progressive) believers. The obvious conclusion is that the Roman Catholic Church risks (or even already is in) a deep crisis concerning religious authority and legitimacy. Symptomatic for this crisis within the Flemish Catholic Church is the aftermath of the debate on female ordination, in the controversy over the degradation of the French progressive bishop Gaillot in January 1995 and the papal visit to Flanders in June 1995. The protests by then have become explicitly anti-Vatican.

Friday 13 (!) January 1995, the Vatican decided to 'banish' Gaillot to a fictitious diocese in Africa, Partenia, that ceased to actually exist in the 7th Century. One of the reasons for this degradation allegedly pertained to his - in the view of the Vatican - excessive and exuberant media performances. Gaillot wrote articles in 'Lui' (a french equivalent to Playboy) and 'Gai-Pied' (a journal of the homosexual movement) and appeared on the popular television program 'Frou-Frou'. But far more important than this were the political views Gaillot defended and the actions he undertook. Gaillot held progressive-leftist political views: he criticized the several of the immigration laws, supported young men refusing to do military service, he had sympathy for the Palestinian cause and he was opposed to the Golf war. But Gaillot also was a dissident regarding Catholic doctrine: he justified the usage of condoms and other preservatives, he was a proponent of female ordination and wanted to grant divorced people the opportunity to remarry before the Church (Gaillot, 1995). Especially on these issues he embodied the actual 'modernist' views that most young Catholics hold. In the press several speculations were made by different persons (including Gaillot himself) on the question if the Minister of Interior Affaires of France, Pasqua, and the reactionary Catholic group Opus Dei would have insisted on his dismissal within circles of the Vatican.

When the news of Gaillot's degradation became public, the progressive parts of the French Catholic community were shocked. Surprisingly the indignation and protests also rose up in Belgium and especially Flanders. All over Flanders protest marches and masses were held on 22 January 1995, when Gaillot celebrated his last mass in Evreux. The previous days, the press was once again the stage of a fierce polemic by progressive Catholics against their Church. In most reactions anger about the degradation of Gaillot stood central, accompanied by a demand for more democracy within the Church and the demand that the Church should care more for the marginalized in society. In an opinion-poll among Catholic (!) Belgians, conducted by the newspaper Le Soir, 75% of the respondents answered to support Gaillot, only 7% said to agree with his dismissal. Suddenly the progressives had their martyr in their struggle for democratization within the Church. Gaillot was getting heroic proportions in declarations of support:

*'He chooses for those who have been put aside by our society and also by our Church. Those things now have their consequences. Gaillot is someone who dares to confront himself with life. God asks him to do this, we regard him as our prophet' (BH, 21/1/95) and 'I experience that*

*every time when Jesus is reborn again in a human (as in the case of priest Daens), He systematically is crucified again' (GVA, 10/2/95).*

It is remarkable how almost all support is primarily put in a religious context, using a discourse of authenticity: Gaillot is presented as the hero/prophet who shows how the Church really should think and act. He is the one really living like Christ and the Scriptures intended it. From this statement on, then criticism is given on the (decision of) the Vatican and/or a demand is made for more democracy.

Those who support the decision of the Vatican, have a totally different tone: Gaillot, the 'red bishop', got what he deserved (or at least what he had coming). Some blame him for being too progressive (and therefore unchristian, for example concerning condoms and homosexuality), others state it is only normal that the Church is a hierarchy in which Gaillot just had to obey, while still others claim the whole progressive protest is a setup. Gaillot is presented as being an irresponsible revolutionary, an anarchist and even an anti-christ. Gaillot stands for everything that destroys the Church: rebellion, immoral views and lack of loyalty.

In the lights of this sharp polarization the Belgian bishops explicitly call for a truce. Archbishop Danneels once again refuses to take sides. He sympathizes with Gaillot, but also states that the Vatican must have had good reasons for his dismissal. Most important of all, Danneels tries to dismantle Gaillot's martyrship by stressing it would be highly unfair to state that he was the only Catholic priest to do a good job and that he had the monopoly on the true spirit of Jesus and the New Testament.

The stakes in this controversy seem to be even higher than in the discussion on female ordination. It is no longer just about democratization within the Church (the social relations within the religious field), but about the legitimacy of the Church itself. *'If the Church does not serve, it serves nothing'*, one of Gaillot's aphorisms, illustrates this tendency. The discussion is no longer 'just' about female ordination (rituals) or democratization (social relations) within the Church, it is about the tasks and merits of the Church itself. It is about religious authority. Progressives have started to take up a critical prophetic discourse, explicitly attacking the monopoly of the Vatican magisterium in holding religious authority. Confronted with the extent of the protest, the bishops are forced to take a step back in defending Vatican doctrine, if they do not want to lose even more the authority stemming from their position. Holding on to a strict argumentation out of the domestic commonwealth would result in a break up of the Church. So, in this case only a compromise can assure (short term) stability.

The efforts to let steam of the kettle are continued with the papal visit to Flanders in sight. On 3 and 4 June 1995 Pope John-Paul, after ten years, visited Belgium once again. The prime reason for the papal visit to Belgium was the beatification of Father Damian, the leper priest of Molokai. This should have happened one year earlier, in the birthtown of Damian, Tremelo, but the trip was then cancelled because the Pope slipped over a piece of soap in his bathroom and broke a thighbone. While the papal visit in 1985 achieved almost triumphant proportions and there were big festivities planned in 1994 for his visit to Tremelo, the trip to Belgium in 1995 was one in mineur. The Pope only stayed for 27 hours in Belgium and limited his public appearance to Brussels. The organizing committee of the visit was not very confident in the success of the papal presence. Cardinal Danneels admitted that there were clear antipapal and anti-Catholic feelings in Flanders at the time of the visit. This fear took such proportions that in the posters announcing the ceremony of the beatification of Damian, only the picture of the leper priest was shown and not a picture of the Pope.

## **Conclusion**

As the analysis of the controversy on female ordination in Catholic Flanders showed, the commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot is an effective instrument to distinguish the different argumentative frames which participants in a debate use. The model does not, however,

permit to answer the question why some frames are being used and others are absent. It cannot tackle issues pertaining to shifts in justifications and it cannot shed light on the effects of the struggle of different argumentations in a debate. Apparently questions like these can only be studied by bringing the concept of power back in the theoretical frame which provides the basis for debate analysis. It was suggested that the perspective of Bourdieu therefore is an important addition to the typological merits of the commonwealth model of Boltanski and Thévenot. Rome was not built in a day. For a long time Flemish Catholics contented themselves with the thought that since the Second Vatican Council graduate changes towards modernization came into effect. The ultra conservative Pope John-Paul II however, awoke sleeping dogs by 'definitively' ending all debate on female ordination and thus unleashing protest within the progressive parts of the Flemish Catholic community, which had kept relatively quiet before with regard to Vatican doctrine on birth control and preservatives. The protests illustrated a crisis of conservative Vatican authority amongst broad layers of the Catholic community, forcing the bishops in taking a compromising position and a low profile defence of the Vatican doctrine. The crisis became even clearer, when the French progressive bishop Gaillot was degraded by the Vatican and Flemish Catholics openly supported the foreign bishop. Gaillot became the martyr of progressive Catholics and was even presented as a new prophet, embodying the authenticity of the Evangelic 'project' which the Church allegedly had betrayed. These phenomena can only be understood by taking into account the struggle within the Roman Catholic Church about religious authority and the social relations accompanying it. The mere juxtapositioning of different argumentative frames is inadequate to analyze a conflict and a debate like this. Even within - or should I say especially within - a dispute pertaining to religious matters.

## Notes

(\*)This article was presented at the Second International Conference of Theory, Culture and Society, Berlin, 10-14 august 1995. The french version 'Rome ne fut pas batie en ce jour. Le modèle des "cités" selon Boltanski et Thévenot et le débat sur les droits et la religion en Flandre' has been published previously in *Social Compass* (1996), Vol.43, No.4, pp.537-561.

(1) Flanders is the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. Flanders is considered to be (or at least to have been) one of the most catholic regions of the world. In a recent survey (Humo, 1 June 1995) it became clear that 84% of the Flemish population are baptised before the catholic church, that 36% consider themselves to be Catholics and that 12% actually go to church weekly.

(2) In total it concerns 257 articles, of which 167 related to female ordination, 74 related to Gaillot and 16 related to the papal visit. The set of articles is not exhaustive, but can be regarded as giving a fair impression of the debate. The articles originate from the following newspapers and magazines: *Gazet van Antwerpen* (GVA), *De Standaard* (DS), *De Morgen* (DM), *Het Volk* (HV), *Het Laatste Nieuws* (HLN), *Het Belang van Limburg* (HBL), *Het Brugsch Handelsblad* (HBH), *Knack*, *Visie*, *Kerk & Leven* and *Humo*. The newspapers most represented are the catholic newspapers *Gazet Van Antwerpen* (113) and *De Standaard* (64) and the leftist newspaper *De Morgen* (37). When articles of these papers are being cited, I give my own translation in English.

(3) A discourse entails a specific way of presenting a subject, in the sense that a certain theme is mediated in a specific way through a typical construction of it (Fairclough, 1992: 128).

(4) Especially because contesters of female ordination also use a traditionalist discourse, stressing loyalty and solidarity.

(5) A field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 71-89) is a relative autonomous space, built around specific positions and institutions, characterized by an own logic. Every field has its own rules of the game and the stake within a field is the monopoly of legitimacy. A field functions as a market, in which the success of someone is foremost determined by the possession of capital (incorporated labour).

- (6) Boltanski and Thévenot use the French word 'cité'. There is probably no real English equivalent, but I will systematically opt for the word 'commonwealth', since translator Philippa Wallis used this term in a review article for *Sociological Review* written by Dodier (1993). It should be stressed here that Boltanski and Thévenot do not pretend to have given an exhaustive list of commonwealths. Others could be constructed too. In fact, they even wonder if they should not also speak about a 'commonwealth of information' (in which the possession and circulation of information is crucial). The theory of Boltanski and Thévenot should of course not be read as a 'final' theory, it constitutes however an interesting analytical perspective for discourse analysis.
- (7) These are: Saint Augustine (commonwealth of inspiration), Bossuet (domestic commonwealth), Hobbes (commonwealth of opinion), Rousseau (civil commonwealth), Adam Smith (commonwealth of the market) and Saint Simon (industrial commonwealth).
- (8) Note the inspiration from the actant-theory of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, to whom the authors refer in their introductory chapter (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991: 35).
- (9) In the same line the authors do not want to go as far as Latour and Callon, by making all justifications relative and looking at them as mere elements in the making of alliances (Duyvendak et alii, 1992: 10).
- (10) At least, that is what I hope.

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