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*The Pious Sex: Catholic Constructions of Masculinity and Femininity in Belgium, c. 1800-1940.* By Tine Van Osselaer. Leuven University Press. 2013. 271pp. £44.

Tine Van Osselaer's excellent new monograph *The Pious Sex* sets itself two ambitious tasks. First, it aims to uncover specifically Catholic constructions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as expressed in Flanders and Wallonia over a century and a half (the book opens at the end of the eighteenth century, moves through Belgian independence in 1830, and ends with the German occupation of Belgium in 1940). Second, it sets out to test 'feminization thesis', a master narrative according to which religion in the post-Enlightenment period was both 'feminized' and made the special preserve of women.

The analysis of gender construction during the 'long' nineteenth century is approached in four parts. The first section, "'Good Catholics'", focuses on the laity and unpicks discourses on the twin 'sanctuaries' of home and church. Drawing on a rich sample of manuals published for the use of priests and confessors, together with sermons, encyclicals and catechisms, Van Osselaer shows how 'Catholic discourse on women could, at one and the same time, warn priests of the "dangerous other" in the shape of sexually tempting women, yet simultaneously praise "true" femininity in the shape of 'Catholic motherhood.' So far, so gendered. Catholic marriage, however, was taken to offer both men and women 'a means of practising Christian virtues' and held to represent a state in which each sex could be helped to 'conquer gender-specific faults'. Similarly, while the Catholic mother was conceived as having a special role in the Christian education of her children, the Catholic *pater familias* was also 'a model that preachers continued to present' without any apparent 'anxiety about the compatibility of masculinity, religiosity and domesticity.' Nineteenth-century Catholic practice, in short, although gendered in many obvious ways was also capable of moving beyond the limitations of gender.

The second section, 'Devoted Catholics', traces the evolution of a mixed devotional movement, the Apostleship of Prayer, into a 'gender exclusive' movement, the League of the Sacred Heart. On the one hand, Van Osselaer has found that 'binary images of Catholic husband and wife' and the increasing 'stress on gender difference in the development of gender-exclusive Leagues' led to divisions in which, for example, 'a father, providing for his family, was depicted as the head of the household and the mother – the homemaker – as its heart.' Again, however, the expected separation of spheres does not tell the whole story. The notion of Catholic heroism, which appears to have been especially pronounced in Belgian devotional literature, was 'a quality that could be attained by both sexes'. Nor were heroines set up exclusively for women or heroes for men: both sexes were actively encouraged to emulate Jesus and the saints. Similarly, 'heroic apostolic men and women' were 'held out as explicit role models' to all Apostleship members, not just those of the same gender.

The third section, 'Catholics in Action', focuses on lay Catholic organisations that were created in response to the papacy's calls for Catholic Social Action and 'based on gender exclusion' from the start. Summoning "'every man of character and influence'" who understood "the responsibilities of a man of action and a committed Christian in modern society,' Catholic Action targeted men, especially during the dangerous 1930s, who might otherwise have been tempted by 'godless' socialism or

‘pagan’ fascism. But while ‘masculinity’ was ‘a positive feature’ in Catholic Action discourse, ‘the *miles Christi* worked hard for his daily bread and took his responsibilities to his family very seriously. Although men were regarded as more influential in the public sphere, they were, alongside women, held responsible for the religious life of their families’. The situation for Catholic women was similarly ambivalent. The home-centred image of Catholic women in the discourse of the League of the Sacred Heart may have ‘primarily indicated confinement and limitations’ but the ‘empowering character’ of Catholic Action also turned ‘women into “mothers” for a world that was in need of re-Christianisation’.

In the final section, ‘Making a Difference,’ Van Osselaer returns to the oft-repeated assertion that a ‘feminisation’ of Catholicism occurred in the nineteenth century by focussing on the Sacred Heart, a devotion claimed by many historians to have been ‘feminine’ in its emotional and sentimental appeal. As the contemporary sources repeatedly show, however, ‘emotional expression was of central importance in the descriptions of Catholic men in nineteenth-century devotional periodicals and report books’. Just because nineteenth-century religiosity ‘fit’ women, Van Osselaer concludes, it does not follow that it excluded men.

The expression ‘the pious sex’ was once used to refer exclusively to women. Ironically, twentieth-century ‘feminization thesis’, for all its merits, has tended rather to reinforce this nineteenth-century cliché. Without ignoring the blatant gender stereotyping and separation of spheres that was so characteristic of the age, Tine Van Osselaer skilfully shows how Catholic constructions of masculinity and femininity also moved beyond gender stereotypes, leaving room for piety that transcended sex and was, in the words of the Bible, ‘neither male nor female’. Even during the quintessential age of gender stereotyping, even in stolidly bourgeois Belgium, joining the ranks of the ‘pious sex’ remained an option for men and women alike.

Van Osselaer handles gender theory, the feminist canon and Catholic theology with rare subtlety. *The Pious Sex* is marked by analytic clarity, empathetic engagement and deep research. The narrative moves easily from Flemish to French, is written in beautifully precise English, and the text is studded with apposite quotations and illustrated with some arresting photographs, including that of a young man saying his bedtime prayers in 1938. The only hint that the monograph began life as a University of Leuven PhD thesis comes from the bewildering variety of fonts and headings used to denote sections, chapters and subheadings, together with the slightly fussy layout of the bibliography. Minor eyestrain, however, is a small price to pay for the pleasure of reading this deeply researched, lucid and humane book.

*The Pious Sex* is a must-read for gender historians, theologians, feminist theorists, religious historians and anyone else who wishes to move beyond the simple stereotypes of ‘female piety’ to gain deeper insights into the logic and contradictions of Catholic devotion in the ‘long’ nineteenth century and throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

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