



QUEER/RELIGION

Gays, Feminism and Headscarves: The Shaping of Controversies in Public Debates in Flanders

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Introduction

In this short paper, I would like to draw attention to the subject of religion, secularity and non-heterosexuality in Western Europe. I intend to explore in a preliminary way some instances of journalistic coverage of what I call recent challenges to the “authority of religion” and the “authority of sexuality” in Flanders—the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. I note that the journalistic coverage of the challenge to sexuality triggers reaction and debate, while the coverage of the challenge to religion triggers very little. I employ a critical comparative approach and ask how we can explain the controversiality of the first and point at issues that I believe need to be taken into account in order to further our understanding of the ways in which religion, gender, secularity and sexuality come to be constructed. I argue that a critical perspective that is sensitive to European local contexts benefits from combining postcolonial, postsecular and queer theory and insights.

Constructing Religion, Secularity and Homosexuality in Public Debates

The examples I explore below are different cases of challenges to the “authority of religion” and the “authority of sexuality” in Flemish public debates of the first half of 2013.

My first example concerns the early 2013 actions of the Belgian branch of the originally Ukraine feminist movement Femen, eagerly covered by all sorts of Flemish newspapers. In its activism, Femen demonstrates an understanding of a shared struggle by feminists and sexual minorities vis-à-vis religion and religious authorities. At the end of April 2013, Femen activists were able to intrude a lecture about blasphemy, organized by ULB, the French-speaking university of Brussels, and harassed the speaker, the Belgian archbishop Joseph Léonard, with what they mockingly called “holy water”. Pouring water on the archbishop, and shouting slogans such as “Stop homophobia” and “Anus Dei is coming”, the activists protested his point of view on homosexuality.^[1] Interestingly, in an interview with a journalist afterwards, one Femen member used explicit religious terminology to explain their action: “We used holy water to help mgr. Léonard to take back his words. Maybe heaven will help him. At least he prayed for us.”^[2]

This action of Femen received wide media attention. It provoked some discussion about the usefulness of Femen’s strategy, as well as about the appropriateness of newspaper editors’ decisions to give ample attention to the event.^[3] The action was fiercely denounced by the federation for Belgian bishops, which emphasized in a press announcement the value of open debate and freedom of speech.^[4] What interests me here is that Femen’s action provoked little discussion about its understanding of Catholicism as the enemy of sexual minorities. A different and somewhat more lively debate followed newspapers’ coverage of a Femen action that took place a little earlier—during the first week of April 2013—at the Grand Mosque in Brussels. There, Femen protested against the treatment of Tunisian Femen member Amina Sboui at the hands of the Tunisian government as well as her family. They employed slogans such as “Fuck your morals” and “Bear breasts against Islamism.” Femen announced that day, the 4th of April, to be the International Topless Jihad Day, and also in other European cities—such as Berlin, Paris, Milan and Stockholm—protests by Femen activists took place in front of embassies and mosques.^[5] Afterwards, this action was discussed, notably by feminist voices who aimed at denouncing Femen and taking critical distance from Femen’s version of feminism, in mainstream as well as leftist newspapers in terms of its notions of religion, feminism, and women’s emancipation, and its links to racism and Islamophobia.^[6] As, for example, Bieke Purnelle put it in the well-known online leftist newspaper De Wereld Morgen:

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Shevchenko & Co. appoint themselves as protectors of Muslim women. They do not take into account that culture and religion play an important role in the lives of many people, including women. Religion and expressing it is a fundamental right. It is true that women are oppressed by sharia, but generalizing this injustice to all women in the Middle East and to Islam is short-sighted and not constructive.^[7]

Albeit few, the feminist responses to Femen's protest at the Grand Mosque of Brussels make the silence around Femen's protest against bishop Léonard concerning its construction of the relationship between religion and sexuality more striking. It seems that the journalistic responses to Femen either say nothing about religion (in the case of bishop Léonard), or they defend religion (in the case of the Grand Mosque), notably against Islamophobia. The difference might be based on the assumption that Femen attacked Catholic authorities particularly (which is then considered a valid attack), while it attacks Islam or Muslims generally (which is then considered an Islamophobic attack that needs to be denounced). Or, it may rather be based on the affective response that Catholicism is the majority religion in Belgium and maintains a position of institutionalized power (and can or should therefore be mocked and critiqued), while Islam is a minority religion and its adherents are often discriminated against (which means that critique should be articulated, if at all, very carefully). Last, understandings of Catholic lay believers as much more able to bear heavy critique levied against Catholic authorities (which means that an ability of critical distance is then implied here) compared to Muslims being more easily hurt by their religious institutions/symbols being attacked, could also play a role. I would suggest that to some degree, all three elements play a constitutive role in how controversies about religion, gender and sexuality come into being (if at all) and how they are framed. Much more in-depth comparative research is needed to determine whether this hypothesis holds. As a footnote, these two actions, the first at the Grand Mosque in Brussels, and the second against bishop Léonard, are up until today the only actions of the Belgian branch of Femen. During the second week of September, the Belgian branch of Femen announced its own abolishment due to international internal disagreements about its future direction.^[8]

Given that Femen's activism *vis-à-vis* religious authorities triggered only few reactions about how to understand the relationship between religion and the emancipation of women and sexual minorities, we may assume that Femen's oppositional framing of the relationship between Christianity and Islam on the one hand, and gender and sexual equality and freedom on the other, has been legible for many in Flanders. However, the journalistic coverage of an event that took place two months earlier was clearly not. The controversy around this event is this paper's second example of recent constructions of religion, secularity, and non-heterosexuality in Flemish public debates. I suggest that the difference regarding the level of controversy of the two examples raises questions regarding which constructions of religion, secularity, and sexuality are legible and acceptable to those who participate in public debates, and which ones are not, and why this is the case. This does not mean that other notions of religion, secularity and sexuality do not exist; however, they remain at the margins or outside the public debates taking place between politicians, journalists, and civil society actors.

The Defense of Public Sexuality Versus the Enforced Privatizing of Religion

In February 2013, Bart the Wever, the mayor of Antwerp and chairman of the Flemish nationalist party, spoke about restrictions homosexual city employees should abide to. He argued that for city desk officers forms of self-expression should be limited in order to protect the neutrality of the city and its public sphere. For homosexuals, this means that they cannot wear any clothing that expresses their sexual orientation, such as a T-shirt with a rainbow print on it (to my knowledge, this remained De Wever's aspiration at the time, and was never turned into an official dictate). Unprecedented in Flemish public debates, De Wever drew parallels between expressions of sexual orientation and of religious identity, such as the Islamic headscarf. As a background, it is important to keep in mind that in 2003, the Belgian government legalized gay marriage, thereby publicly recognizing and legally institutionalizing two-coupled committed non-heterosexuality. Moreover, since 2007 Antwerp city desk officers have been forbidden to wear a headscarf. De Wever put it as such: "I do not want anyone at the city desks wearing a Rainbow T-shirt. Because a homosexual demonstrates through such symbols that he or she is committed to that obedience. And people do recognize that."^[9]

The journalistic coverage of De Wever's remarks created an immediate stir among Flemish politicians, journalists and civil society actors and at media forums.^[10] Many worried about the equal rights of individuals with a non-heterosexual orientation. Also the parallel between expressions of religion and of sexual orientation evoked angry reactions. The notion of 'obedience' [in Dutch: *obediëntie*] is part of Catholic religious terminology, and refers to monastics who made vows to obey their prior. This parallel was felt to be completely misplaced. Liberal politician Alexander de Croo (Open VLD), for example, responded: "Is an expression of sexual orientation—even in official jobs—really an issue? Whom we love is a completely different issue than in which god we believe, isn't it?" De Croo's response reveals the often reiterated understanding of a fundamental distinction between religious identity and sexuality. The first is considered to be a conviction and world-view, which is constructed through socialization and can be as a 'chosen' identity either affirmed or renounced. The second, however, is perceived to be an intrinsic part of individual identity,

which cannot be repressed or renounced, but needs to be confessed and practiced without restrictions to enable individual flourishing and happiness. De Wever's suggestion to restrict city desk officers' non-heterosexual self-expressions clearly went against the grains of public common sense and understandings about the relationships between religious identity, sexual identity, secularity, neutrality, and the public sphere. Non-heterosexual orientations are not perceived to be threatening the neutral public sphere, but are rather seen as in need of protection from discrimination in order to be enabled to flourish publicly. On the other hand, expressions of religious identity do continue to be perceived as threatening the dominant order of secular neutrality, and therefore need to be banned from official jobs and teaching in public education. The responses to De Wever's point of view need to be situated in a context of Flemish policy-making at the level of municipal politics, public education, and the labor market that construct and ban the Islamic headscarf as the sartorial practice that opposes human flourishing, both of the female wearer—who must be oppressed by her community—as well as of her white, non-Muslim environment—who must be suffering its proselytizing force.

Interestingly, one and a half years later, in August 2014, an opinion piece was published by philosopher and religion teacher Mathias Balcaen at the mainstream news website *Deredactie.be*.^[11] In this opinion piece, he questions the dominant assumption that sexual identity is not a personal choice and should therefore be expressed freely and publicly, while religious identity is a personal choice and should therefore be kept private. Balcaen expresses the hope that as the free expression of non-heterosexual identity today seems to pose no problem for neutrality, the same will go in the near future for headscarf-wearing Muslim women in public office and as teachers. At the forum, his text generated a number of responses. Of these 28 responses, most aim at setting things straight by arguing that Balcaen got it entirely wrong with his understanding of sexuality, religion, and choice, and by reinforcing notions about what can be made public and what should remain or made private. Two notable exceptions are present. The first (Dennis) poses questions regarding the framing of religion as choice: "Forcing them [believers] [to accept the notion] that they choose their faith, makes no sense, in the same way as considering homosexuality to be choice. Denying Muslims or Christians the space to be faithful, based upon the argument that it is their choice, is as repulsive as forcing gays to hide their sexual nature [in Dutch: *seksuele geaardheid*]." The second posits that any definition of neutrality is subjective, contrary to the assumption that these definitions are objective. However, these two responses remain marginal next to the many others (including those in the controversy of February 2013) whose main stake was reinforcing perceptions about clear-cut differences between the foundation of various kinds of identity, and their subsequent belonging to public or private spheres.

The above exploration reveals that De Wever's statement stood alone in considering sexual identity as a "commitment" that threatens the normative neutrality of public office. In a way, we could say that De Wever's comments about sexuality are "queering" dominant notions regarding sexual identity. This is precisely where lies the controversiality of his construction of both religion and sexuality as opposed to the status quo of the secular neutral public sphere. He portrays non-heterosexuality as a conviction, a personal choice for belonging to a non-conformist community or subculture with its own political-social agenda. This potential radical difference of non-heterosexuality is immediately undone by the many responses that aim at domesticating sexuality as a subjective and individual issue that has nothing to do with a political agenda or envisioning society differently. The notion of queer identity as a radical political choice and belonging, however marginal, certainly does exist among LGBTQI communities in Flanders. But so far, it might feel as a too dangerous route to abandon traditional identity politics, as De Wever shows that such a discourse can be easily utilized to condemn expressions of non-heterosexuality in the public sphere and to oppose equal rights for LGBTQI persons.

The Need for Combining Postcolonial, Postsecular, and Queer Perspectives

To draw to a conclusion, I argue for the need of combining postcolonial, postsecular, and queer perspectives and critique in order to deepen our insights into the constructions of religion, secularity, and non-heterosexuality and the ways in which these constructs are co-constituted in West-European contexts. Why would studies of sexuality benefit from postcolonial and postsecular perspectives? First, feminist postcolonial critique has focused on the various effects of European colonialism and imperialism concerning constructions of gender, sexuality, religion, race/ethnicity, and culture. They have, for example, critiqued and deconstructed discourses that position religious-cultural minority traditions vis-à-vis the emancipation and freedom of women and LGBT's. In Flemish public debates, the idea that religion is harmful for women and LGBT's, which arguably emerges from a recent past experience with leftist and secularist struggles against the authority and omnipresence of Catholicism, is today often projected upon Muslim minorities. This projection, however, doesn't remain uncontested, as the above exploration of responses to Femen demonstrates.

Postcolonial insights should be combined with the theoretical claim that sexual self-expression became a major basis of the so-called subjective turn that since the 1960s opposed all sorts of external authorities. This subjective turn is considered to be constitutive of processes of secularization and epistemological formations of the secular in Western Europe. Based on the responses to the aspirations of Antwerp mayor De Wever, one could say that the emphasis on individual sexual self-expression became central to understandings of the public sphere, while religious self-expression (especially if Islamic) in public spheres is denounced for the sake of secular neutrality. According to a number of postcolonial queer theorists, homosexuality arguably lost some of its initial radicality due to its domestication and assimilation into West-European publics and culture. They hold that forms of homonationalism have become a major force of exclusion and discrimination of

religious minorities and sensibilities. Critically investigating the entanglements of race/ethnicity, religion, and sexuality enables us to see these discursive and material public-private shifts.

In short, bringing together postcolonial, postsecular and queer perspectives will be highly fruitful to deepen our understanding of various histories and contemporary trends of affirmation and exclusions in the European context. They provide the analytical instruments to take up a critical study of religion, secularity, and sexuality in Flanders and to grapple with a landscape that is characterized by specific concepts and affects, e.g. anti-Catholicism, Islamophobia, racism, nationalism, and secularism.

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Footnotes

1. "Femen Belaagt Aartsbisschop Léonard," *De Morgen*, April 23, 2013. [Return to text]
2. "Femen: 'Léonard Doen Nadenken,'" *VTM Nieuws*, April 24, 2013. [Return to text]
3. Fikry El Azzouzi, "Misschien Begrijp Ik Vrouwen Gewoon Niet," *Kifkif*, April 28, 2013; Tom Naegels, "In Gods Naam," *De Standaard*, May 22, 2013; "Femen: 'Léonard Doen Nadenken,'" *VTM Nieuws*, April 24, 2013. [Return to text]
4. Bieke Purnelle, "Het Fenomeen Femen," *De Wereld Morgen*, April 24, 2013. [Return to text]
5. "Topless Protest voor de Grote Moskee in Brussel," *De Morgen*, April 4, 2013; Alan Taylor, "Femen Stages a 'Topless Jihad,'" *The Atlantic*, April 4, 2013. [Return to text]
6. Julie Carlier, "Blote Borsten Zonder Boodschap," *De Standaard*, April 25, 2013; Evie Embrechts, "Femen en de Paternalistische Pornocultuur," *De Wereld Morgen*, April 10, 2013; Bieke Purnelle, "Het Fenomeen Femen," *De Wereld Morgen*, April 24, 2013. [Return to text]
7. Bieke Purnelle, "Het Fenomeen Femen," *De Wereld Morgen*, April 24, 2013. [Return to text]
8. "Belgische Tak van Femen Houdt het voor Bekeken," *De Morgen*, September 10, 2013. [Return to text]
9. "De Wever Verbiedt 'Homo-Kledij' achter Loket," *HLN*, February 2, 2013. [Return to text]
10. For reactions from politicians across the political spectrum, see "Politici over 'Homokledij-Verbod': Bart de Wever Gaat Te Ver in Beknotten van Vrijheden," *Knack*, February 2, 2013. For the reaction of Çavaria, the Flemish LGBT umbrella organization, see Timothy Junes, "Çavaria en Het Roze Huis over Homo-T-shirt: Waar Trekken We de Grens van Expressie?" *Zizo*, February 2, 2013; "Holebi- en Transgenderkoepel: 'Bart de Wever Zet de Deur Open voor Misbruik,'" *Knack*, February 2, 2013. For discussions in mainstream and alternative leftist media: Wim Denolf, "'Aan A Ziede da Nie': De Neutrale Homo Is Terug," *Knack*, February 3, 2013; Yves Desmet, "De Wever Maakt er een Sport van Fenomenen Die er niet Zijn te Problematiseren," *De Morgen*, February 4, 2013; Barbara Moens, "De Wever Oogst Kritiek met Ban op Homo-T-Shirt," *De Tijd*, February 2, 2013; Michael Onkelinx, "'Homo-Kledij' en de Conservatieve Maatschappij," *De Wereld Morgen*, February 2, 2013; Orlando Verde, "Hoe Laat Is Het, Mi Corazón?," *Kifkif*, February 6, 2013. [Return to text]
11. Mathias Balcaen, "Homo's wel, moslima's niet? – Mathias Balcaen," *Redactie.be*, August 25, 2014. [Return to text]