



Material Religion

The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

ISSN: 1743-2200 (Print) 1751-8342 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20>

Projecting Faith: French and Belgian Catholics and the Magic Lantern Before the First World War

Frank Kessler & Sabine Lenk

To cite this article: Frank Kessler & Sabine Lenk (2020) Projecting Faith: French and Belgian Catholics and the Magic Lantern Before the First World War, *Material Religion*, 16:1, 61-83, DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2019.1696560](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696560)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696560>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Jan 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 520



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

**projecting faith: french
and belgian catholics and
the magic lantern before
the first world war
frank kessler^a and
sabine lenk^{b,c}**

^autrecht university, netherlands; ^buniversity of antwerp, belgium; ^cuniversité libre de bruxelles, belgium

ABSTRACT

Around 1900, the Catholic Church in Belgium and France started to systematically use the magic lantern for religious education, but also as a propaganda tool in their fight against their laic opponents in both countries. In the course of the nineteenth century, the magic lantern had become a major visual mass medium in Europe and the United States. The light beam of the lantern was seen as a powerful means to sustain faith and disseminate the views of the Church. While numerous members of the Catholic clergy embraced the *projections lumineuses* as a continuation of the long-standing tradition to teach the gospel through images, from glass windows to paintings, they had to face opposition by those who thought the magic lantern unfit to be used to lecture on religious matters. Despite such resistance, the projected image became an important medium used throughout the first decades of the twentieth century by the Catholic Church.

Keywords: magic lantern, Catholic Church, illustrated lectures, propaganda, Belgium, France

Frank Kessler is a professor of Media History at Utrecht University and currently the Director of Utrecht University's Research Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON). He is a co-founder and co-editor of *KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films* and the *KINtop-Schriften* series.
F.E.Kessler@uu.nl

Sabine Lenk is a film archivist and media historian. Since 2018 she is a researcher at University of Antwerp and Université libre de Bruxelles for the project "B-magic. The Magic Lantern and Its Cultural Impact as Visual Mass Medium in Belgium (1830-1940)", which she co-authored. She is a co-founder and co-editor of *KINtop*, *KINtop-Schriften*, and *KINtop Studies in Early Cinema*.
sabine.lenk@uantwerpen.be

Material Religion volume 16, issue 1, pp. 61–83

DOI: [10.1080/17432200.2019.1696560](https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1696560)



© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Introduction

When, on 15 October 1902, the first issue of the monthly journal *L'Ange des projections lumineuses* (angel of lantern projections), published by the diocese of Digne in France, presented itself to its readers, the editor-in-chief described the *raison d'être* of this new periodical as follows: "[...] to support the apostles, to provide them with everything they need to accomplish their pious projects [...]" ("Notre raison d'être" 1902, 1).¹ These apostles were to use a "precious means to sow the seeds of truth among the masses" (2) – *les projections lumineuses*, i. e. magic lantern projections, or, to use a more common English phrase, illustrated

lectures.² The magic lantern, often considered nowadays simply a "precursor" of cinema that became obsolete with the emergence of moving pictures, was in fact the predominant visual mass medium in the second half of the nineteenth century, which, for educational ends at least, continued to be used throughout at least the first half of the twentieth century. As Schaefer (2017) has shown for the U.S., it was indeed widely used by religious communities, as well as by missionaries.

In what follows, we would like to focus on the Catholic Church in France and Belgium and its strategies to adopt the magic lantern on a large scale in the years preceding the First World War. We will look at the rapid *institutionalization* of projection services in the early years of the twentieth century, the *enthusiasm*, but also *resistance* that this process provoked, as well as the *specific uses* of the lantern for propaganda, religious and cultural edification, and church practices, discussing three examples.

Institutionalization: The "Œuvres des projections lumineuses"

At the time when the first issue of *L'Ange des projections lumineuses* was published, the French Catholic Church had realized that they had seriously fallen behind in what they perceived as a fierce propaganda war waged against them by the secularist teachers' organization Ligue de l'enseignement and, more generally, the Freemasons, whom they saw as the major force behind such activities. The main tool in this war were illustrated lectures addressing young people, young men in particular, during the years after they had left school until they were drafted for military service. These were the target group of the so-called "Œuvres post-scolaires" initiated by the Ligue de l'enseignement in the mid-1890s (Petit 1911). The second issue of *L'Ange des projections lumineuses* discusses the annual report to the French ministry of education by the sociologist Edouard Petit, one of the leading figures of laical education in France and Inspecteur général de l'Instruction publique (state official for the national educational system). In his report, Petit stated that in 1901/02 the *Ligue de l'enseignement* had organized 75,000 illustrated lectures, and its *Musée pédagogique* (pedagogical museum) had sent out 31,104 slide sets and sold or rented out

268 projection lanterns, while the *Société nationale de Conférences populaires* (national society for public popular lectures) had distributed 100,000 lecture texts, including lantern readings, i.e. lecture texts accompanying slide sets. In addition, the Ligue had 294 distribution centers all over the country that had circulated 42,350 sets, and their main office 50,679 more (G. A. 1902, 24). These figures probably include sets used for school teaching. Some years earlier, in the winter of 1895/96 there had only been 61,476 lectures, and only 14,000 of these were illustrated ones (see Léo Claretie, "L'École post-scolaire", *Le Monde illustré*, 1896, 343, quoted in Perriault 1981, 101).

It seems only natural that vocational interest groups such as the Ligue were heavily engaged in this field given the fact that secular evening classes were highly popular in the period that the lantern began to develop into a mass medium: in France, in 1869, about 35,000 lectures with or without projected images were given to some 800,000 registered adults (i.e. persons older than 13 years) (cf. Octave Gréard, *Education et instruction*, Paris: Hachette, 1887, quoted in Perriault 1981, 96 and 102–103). By the time the Catholic Church started to systematically develop projections services, their secular opponents had already been active for a decade. The Ligue had centralized several big slide collections at the *Musée pédagogique* in Rouen, which quickly increased the number of slide sets it distributed: from 1895 to 1897 with 8,853 boxes sent out it progressed continuously to 12,056 (1897/98), then 22,890 (1898/99), 26,920 (1899/1900), 28,120 (1900/01), 29,739 (1901/02), 31,498 (1902/03), 31,915 (1903/04).³

The Catholic Church did not deny that the Ligue's efforts in the field of public education were beneficial as long as they dealt with subjects such as agriculture, health, hygiene, or the fight against alcoholism. However, whenever topics related to history, philosophy, or religion were treated, such lectures were marked by "materialism, the negation of future life, morals without God" (G. A. 1902, 25). Facing the threat of such a massive and – as they saw it – mostly anti-clerical, even atheist propaganda machine, the Church decided to start their own *Œuvres des projections lumineuses*.⁴ At the end of the article, the author launched this ardent appeal: "We, too, by the grace of God, have our projections services, so let us use them, let us pray and work! Let us undertake everything we can to neutralize the efforts of impiety in this new field!" (G. A. 1902, 25). This author, in other words, did not see the medium of the lantern itself as the problem, but appealed to fellow Catholics to use projections themselves to fight their secular opponents. All in all, the "enemy" was perceived as a threat as well as, paradoxically, a model to follow, at least as far as the adversaries' organizational strengths were concerned. If the laics had turned the lantern into a "marvelous war machine", the Catholics should do the same and fight back ("La Lutte" 1903, 67).

Such initiatives developed and expanded rapidly over the following years. By 1910 almost all of the French dioceses had a projections service where parishes could rent slide sets, often accompanied by lantern readings, sometimes also projection equipment. The main supplier, where the diocesan Œuvres could acquire slides and equipment, was the French Catholic propaganda organization Maison de la Bonne Presse, located in Paris (Pierre 1910, 38), which also acted as a supplier for Belgian Catholics across the border (IJzermans 1909;⁵ Saint-Martin 2004, 398). The Œuvres then served as distribution centers for slide sets, lantern readings and, albeit in a more limited way, also equipment which local priests and parishes could rent in order to organize illustrated lectures.⁶

Apart from *L'Ange des projections lumineuses*, other monthly publications informed their readers on both practical and theoretical issues regarding magic lantern projections, such as the journal *Le Fascinateur* (founded in 1903 by Maison de la Bonne Presse), which was distributed all over France or, on a regional level, *Le Rayon* (founded in 1906 by the dioceses of Cambrai and Arras) in the northern part of France, which was read also in neighboring Belgium. In addition, since 1901, *Les Conférences* published lecture texts, some of which were illustrated lectures. The number of publications dedicated to these activities and their various aspects, including technical ones, indicates that lecturing had become a major means of public communication for the Catholic Church. Moreover, Maison de la Bonne Presse also published G.-Michel Coissac's handbook on projection practice (Coissac n. d.), which offered technical advice, but also instructions on how to organize and present an illustrated lecture. Coissac discussed in particular in what way speech and images were to be combined: firstly, the lecture could precede the projections, secondly word and image could be presented simultaneously or, as a third option, alternately. The latter was for Coissac the preferred mode, but it depended on the technical possibility of switching between light and darkness, so in the end the simultaneous mode appeared to be the most practical one (Coissac n. d., 415-417).

Technical issues treated in *L'Ange des projections* and in *Le Rayon* concerned mainly the equipment that was needed for the projections – screens, lantern, burners, condensers, lamps – and how to choose it, as well as practical questions such as how to best clean lenses or how to fabricate one's own slides. Innovations and new inventions in the field of projection were also presented regularly, in particular those made available by Maison de la Bonne Presse. The most prominent technical topic to be discussed, however, were the various light sources one could use for the lantern, such as alcohol, acetylene, or various oxygen-based gases and their respective merits. While a decision for one system or another was a purely practical matter, one subscriber, according to a quote given in *Le Rayon*, self-mockingly declared that it was Lent and thus "time to convert" to

another light source, from acetylene to oxygen-ether, which was considerably stronger, and he inquired about the costs. The answer was: "It takes 171 Francs to go from obscurity or half-darkness to see the light." ("Renseignement" 1910)

Apostles with a Lantern: Enthusiasts and Opponents

Those among the French clergy who embraced the medium of the projected image for religious teaching, apologetic lectures, or propagandistic attacks against the "enemies of the Church" could not necessarily count upon the full support of everybody else within the Church. In an article published in 1903 in *L'Ange des projections lumineuses*, several objections to using the lantern that had reached the editors were listed. Some were opposed to the lantern simply because it was an innovation, remarking that neither the apostles nor the saints had needed projected images or music ("Petite controverse" 1903, 132). Others even rejected the use of the lantern to lecture on religious matters in general (Linon 1909, 6). The journal replied by quoting the Parisian Abbé Sédillot, who had pointed out that, quite on the contrary, those engaged in lantern slide lectures were in fact the ones who followed tradition, referring to the Church's long-standing practice of teaching the gospel through images, and in particular the paintings in churches ("Petite controverse" 1903, 133).

Another objection to the use of the lantern concerned projections in churches ("Petite controverse" 1903, 132). The opponents not only thought that it was inappropriate to introduce a kind of spectacle into the House of God, but also feared that this would produce the undesirable effect that those who attended such "noisy gatherings" might rather lose faith. The advocates replied that such fears were completely unfounded and that there were numerous examples proving that even sceptics, once they had attended an illustrated lecture, had to admit that, quite on the contrary, such events were both instructive and edifying and took place in an absolutely pious atmosphere. Abbé Sédillot concluded his defense of the projected image by quoting the Bible verse commenting the first appearance of light: "Et vidit Deus quod esset bonum" (133).

Yet, three years later, in 1906, this issue was apparently still unresolved. In an anonymous article in *Le Rayon*, the author asked why so many members of the clergy still resisted innovation and even claimed that Christians had never received instruction with the help of "images lumineuses," while in fact the stained-glass church windows could be considered an earlier version (see Verrips in this volume), and in several respects a much simpler one, of what could be achieved by modern slide projections ("L'Enseignement par l'image" 1906). The advocates for the use of projected images thus constructed a genealogy for the new medium that referred to the various types of images that were part of the Church's long history, and which allowed them to counter the argument that they were advocating a problematic and potentially dangerous modern

device. One example is a book by the Belgian Jesuit Gabriel Le Bail (1907), who traced the tradition of teaching through images back to Antiquity.⁷

One can indeed see a material connection between colored magic lantern slides and the technique developed for painted glass in church windows by medieval monks from the twelfth century onwards (see Von Witzleben n. d., 17–34). Thanks to the transparency, sunlight could produce an almost “magic” effect by projecting the colors onto the floor of churches. As Elisabeth von Witzleben put it: “Painted glass [...] therefore is the appropriate material to express Christianity’s longing for a heavenly realm, with a perfection that no other form of art can equal.” (Von Witzleben n. d., 17). Moreover, after dark, when the church was illuminated from the inside, the congregation could contemplate the paintings on the walls and the statues surrounding them, which turned Gothic cathedrals into “[...] an immense book teaching the people stories about Jesus Christ, the Virgin and the Saints” (Le Bail 1907, 6).

In addition, the proponents could refer to illustrious ancestors in the Catholic Church itself, such as the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, whose *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* contained in its second edition of 1671 a sketch of a *laterna magica*, and also the French Abbé François-Napoléon-Marie Moigno who had organized illustrated science popularization lectures in his *Salle du Progrès* in the 1870s (“*La lanterne magique et les appareils de projection*” 1903; Saint-Martin 2004, 382). Besides putting projected images firmly into Catholic traditions, the enthusiasts wanted to also demonstrate that the lantern was indeed a serious means of communication and not a simple amusement or toy.⁸

This genealogy did not concern the projected image alone, but included also the priests who had decided to use the lantern. The first issue of *L’Ange des projections lumineuses* referred to them as “apostles” and to the “apostolic work” they were undertaking (“*Notre raison d’être*” 1902). Their patron saint, it was suggested, should be St. Paul, as he himself had been “the providential victim of a celestial Projection” (“*Le Patron des projectionnistes*” 1908). An even stronger claim appeared on the title page of *Le Rayon* starting with the March issue 1908 – an illustration shows Jesus Christ preaching to a group of people, accompanied by a caption reading: “O Jésus, divin conférencier. Éclairez-nous, fortifiez-nous par votre grâce.” (Oh Jesus, divine lecturer. Illuminate us, strengthen us by your grace.) (Figure 1) In this way, the magic lantern lecture was explicitly written into the Catholic tradition of preaching faith, going back to Jesus himself. Overall, in other words, the argumentation strategy was historical rather than theological, trying to show that the projected image could be considered continuing a century-old practice. As Isabelle Saint-Martin (2004, 388) put it, the lantern was mainly presented as a modern medium “[...] in the service of the sermon, assigning to the image the function of *ancilla praedicationis*, which was compliant with tradition.”

LE RAYON

BULLETIN MENSUEL

DE

L'ŒUVRE DES CONFÉRENCES ET DES CATÉCHISMES AVEC PROJECTIONS



O JÉSUS, DIVIN CONFÉRENCIER
Éclairez-nous, fortifiez-nous par votre grâce

FIG 1

Title page of *Le Rayon*. (Source: www.gallica.fr).

Yet, the cover of *Le Rayon* did carry the motto "Je suis la vraie lumière" (I am the true light), a reference to both John 1:4 and John 8:12, which in this context quite obviously established a link with the light beam of the projection lantern. (Figure 2) The motto could thus be read on the one hand as a variation or condensation of these verses, but at the same time it also suggested that the beam of the lantern (giving the journal – *Le Rayon* – its title) served precisely to propagate the true faith. The lantern helped to teach the gospel, to explain and disseminate the position of the Catholic Church concerning vital issues in modern society, and to help the faithful to gain knowledge on a broad range of subjects.

In fact, Pope Pius X had enjoyed lantern performances in the Vatican in 1904 and 1907 (Saint-Martin 2004, 390). At least one other projection was organized by Maison de la Bonne Presse in the Vatican on 22 April 1909, for an audience including twenty bishops ("Une séance de projections au Vatican" 1909). Pius X's predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, had even agreed to being filmed by the American Mutoscope and Biograph company in 1898. In one of the films, he issues the blessing directed towards the camera

FIG 2

Cover page of *Le Rayon*.
 (Source: www.gallica.fr).



and, by extension, to all those who afterwards saw the picture on a screen. Yet, opposition to lantern and film projections continued, in particular with respect to projections in churches themselves. On 7 September 1902, for instance, *Le Journal de Bruxelles* reported on a meeting of Belgian and French representatives of the Catholic Church, during which Abbé Gosset suggested to organize illustrated lectures and lantern performances in parish halls and other buildings, but never inside a church. According to this article, Gosset's proposition was approved by all those present. However, according to Isabelle Saint-Martin (2004, 387) in 1905 about 40% of the lecturers were hostile to projections in churches, in 1906 only 10%, and by 1907 almost all of them were in favor of that practice.

Véronneau (2007) sees such debates as an ideological conflict within the Catholic Church, which culminated in 1912, when those who insisted on the power of the religious speech and the sacredness of the biblical word obtained a partial victory. First, Pope Pius X forbade catholic priests to go to cinemas ("Les prêtres et le cinématographe" 1909). On 28 May 1912, *Il Corriere della Sera* published an article reporting that film screenings in churches were allowed only when the Holy Sacrament had been removed, men and women were separated, the lights were on except during the projection, priests were supervising the event, and a bishop had authorized it ("Le Cinéma à l'église" 1912). Finally, on 10 December 1912, the Sacred Consistorial Congregation prohibited all projections, that is both still and moving (i. e. film) images, *inside* a church building (Saint-Martin 2004, 298; Véronneau 2007, 28–29). In parish halls and other buildings belonging to the church they could still be shown, which thus was in line with the abovementioned moderate suggestion by Abbé Gosset. Still, the Vatican thus followed the argument that the House of God should be a place of worship and prayer exclusively. The cultural status of cinema and the discussions around movie theaters as places of corruption may have been important factors in this decision, but, as we have seen, debates on projections in churches had started much earlier with the magic lantern.

Despite this setback, the “apostles” using the lantern still had some powerful supporters within the Church hierarchy as several bishops in France and Belgium encouraged and supported their work. In any case, the very existence of a journal such as *Le Rayon* bears witness to the fact that illustrated lectures had become a non-negligible aspect in the Catholic Church’s efforts to “to sow the seeds of truth among the masses” (“Notre raison d’être” 1902, 2).⁹

Propaganda and Patriotism

While in the lantern practices of religious communities in the U.S. analyzed by Schaefer (2017), religious and moral education was central, the French and Belgian Catholics used the projected image also for propaganda purposes.¹⁰ In this respect, it is rather telling that the illustrated lectures presented in the first two issues of *L’Ange des projections lumineuses* were dedicated to “Le Drapeau Français” (The French Flag) and “La Patrie” (The Fatherland). It was important for the French Church to underline its patriotism in a period when their political adversaries were busy pushing for the separation between the Church and the State – a battle that the Church lost in 1905, when the French parliament passed a law to that effect. This also explains the often pugnacious tone that one can find in the Catholic periodicals dedicated to the projected image at that time.

The French Revolution had put an end to an almost symbiotic relationship between the Catholic Church and the French State that had lasted for many centuries. Following the concordat of 1801, in the course of the nineteenth century, the Church had to redefine its place in an increasingly secular cultural environment and had to face political forces that tried to limit its influence on French society and succeeded in 1905 to separate Church and State. Consequently, it was important for the Church to emphasize that it was not only an organic part of the French nation, but also a major patriotic force.

The illustrated lecture dedicated to the French flag entitled “Le Drapeau Français. Sa signification et son histoire” is a case in point. It was announced as a “religious and patriotic lecture” and foregrounds the religious symbolism of the three colors: white, the immaculate color, refers to God the Almighty, blue to maternal tenderness, while red stands for fire and blood and the bravery of the soldiers prepared to die for their country. The flag “is France,” but it is “Catholic France, France blessed by God” (“Le Drapeau” 1903). Merging patriotism and Catholicism, the lecture presents an image of France as a nation which, by essence, is deeply religious and thus excludes, as it were, the anti-clerical political forces. Seven of the eighteen slides to be projected to illustrate the lecture depict various important battles (Bouvines, Jemappes, Valmy, Rivoli, Alger, Sebastopol, Solferino), thus claiming in particular Napoleon’s victories for Catholic France. Nine slides show various forms of flags or banners related to religion and the French nation, mostly in a military context: Constantine the Great’s labarum,



FIGS 3 and 4

Slides from a set on the life of Jeanne d'Arc distributed by Maison de la Bonne Presse (courtesy Collectie Toverlantaarmuseum Scheveningen).

Charlemagne's oriflamme, the blue oriflamme of the Kings of France, Joan of Arc's standard, the white flag of royal France, the tricolor, Bonaparte's military standards, the Eagles, and the flag of Sacré-Coeur. The slide set thus establishes a genealogy from the first Christian Emperor to Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Napoleon, and Louis-Philippe, thus weaving together the Church, the military and several of the emblematic figures of the nation. Similarly, the slide set "La Patrie," which addressed in particular young soldiers, glorified the military from a Christian point of view: not only was dying for the fatherland glamorized as the "most beautiful, the most enviable destiny" ("La Patrie" 1902, 26), but the lecture also presented Christian "soldiers" from Charlemagne to Napoleon, concluding: "The best Christians are the best soldiers. You will be valiant soldiers, because you are valiant Christians." ("La Patrie" 1902, 27).¹¹ Among the most popular sets the projection services had to offer were those dedicated to the life and death of Jeanne d'Arc, a historical figure who combined French patriotism and Catholic faith in a unique and exemplary manner. (Figures 3 and 4)

In 1908, a brief note in the monthly bulletin *Le Rayon*, published by the dioceses of Cambrai and Arras, listed several apologetic series that they had produced themselves and for which Abbé Ducrocq had written the readings that the subscribers could use. Three among these were dedicated to the motto of the Third Republic which had its roots in the French Revolution: Freedom, Equality, Fraternity. These three illustrated lectures – "L'Église et la liberté," "L'Église et l'égalité," "L'Église et la fraternité" – were among the most demanded ones of this Œuvre in the north of France ("Améliorations projetées" 1908, 34). This clearly is another instance of the Church's effort to explain and propagate its position with regard to political and social issues, proposing a genuinely Catholic take on the Republic's motto.

In addition to this constant affirmation of the Catholic Church's position in French history and of its patriotism, illustrated lectures were also used to attack those forces in French society that were considered incompatible with the teachings of the Church. The "enemies" were in particular the secularist teachers, the freemasons, the liberals, the socialists, and the anarchists. The October 1906 issue of *Le Rayon* presented a catechism lecture, "Les Commandements de Dieu" (The Commandments of God), in which these enemies were addressed ("Conférences-Catéchismes" 1906). Slide 11 identified socialism as "one of the most terrible enemies of faith, it wants to abolish property, the family, and religion, and one cannot be at the same time a Catholic and a socialist," the latter statement implying that apparently at least some Catholics may have thought it possible to be both (143). Anarchy, in turn, as the note referring to slide 12 stated, "is born out of socialism like a fruit from a tree, it aims at the abolition of all religion, morals, judges, army and nation" (143). Slides 13 to 20 were directed against freemasonry, which was declared to be an anti-clerical

FIG 5

Anti-masonic slide from "Les Commandements de Dieu", *Le Rayon*, October 1906. Source: www.gallica.fr.



17. *La franc-maçonnerie et l'enfant* (Paillart). — La franc-maçonnerie veut tuer la foi dans le cœur de l'enfant, par les écoles sans Dieu et les fêtes laïques destinées à remplacer les cérémonies religieuses.

secret society that was rightly condemned by the Church. Freemasonry, according to this lecture, was a subversive and destructive organization that undermined institutions such as the family, the laws, the army and, most importantly, the schools, its rites and symbols being but a mockery of the religious ones (144-145). Not only did the Freemasons want to “destroy faith in the hearts of French women by imposing [...] a secularist education in girls’ schools” (145), but also in the hearts of children in their “schools without God and with secularist rituals aiming at replacing religious ceremonies” (144) (Figure 5).

With respect to this illustrated lecture it is interesting to note that there were considerably more slides dedicated to fight freemasonry than to attack socialism and anarchy. This may have been due to the fact that the Catholic Church saw freemasonry as its principal enemy, and that secularism was more or less identified with it. Also, while socialists and anarchists were apparently considered to oppose the institutions of civil society rather openly, the freemasons were portrayed as secretive and malicious. This might explain while in this lecture masonic activities were exposed in more detail and much more extensively.

This example also shows that a slide set, which, judging from its title “Les Commandements de Dieu,” seemed to simply offer religious instruction, contained in fact also an attack against those

FIG 6

Slide: "They shall not have it, the pure soul of the child." (courtesy KADOC at KU Leuven, photo: Adeline Werry).



groups in society that the Church identified as its "worst enemies." This illustrated lecture did not only tell the audience how to follow the divine commandments, but also who were the forces in French society that had to be fought by each and every Catholic.¹²

In Belgium, the Catholic Church fought in particular against the so-called "neutral", i.e. secular schools. On this important battlefield, the "pure soul of the child" had to be saved from liberal, masonic, or atheist influences, a recurrent topic in magic lantern slides of that time (Figure 6).

An "Exceedingly Dignified" Spectacle

Historical source material describing an illustrated lecture given by the clergy is extremely scarce. Presentations of slide sets such as "Le Drapeau" or "Les Commandements de Dieu" allow to establish the sequence of slides and may contain at least some elements of the lecturer's comments (even though lecturers could easily change this order, leave out slides, or add some from a different set, if they thought that this would work better with the audience they addressed). While this kind of information is very valuable for the historian, it can at best convey some general impressions of such an illustrated lecture. One of the rare descriptions of a religious event including projections, written by a journalist named Bou, was published in *Journal de Roubaix* of 30 December 1908 and featured at length in the January 1909 issue of *Le Rayon* ("La "Rédemption" 1909). While this report does not cover all aspects of that evening's presentation, nor can the performance itself be taken as representative for the way in which the French Catholics used the lantern, it offers many interesting insights into such a lantern performance addressing a Catholic audience.

This “exceedingly dignified” spectacle took place not in a church, but in the festival hall of the Institution Notre-Dame des Victoires in Roubaix and was presided over by Mgr Margerin, rector of the Catholic faculty of Lille. It was not an illustrated lecture, but a combination of projections and chants. The evening started with projected portraits of Pope Pius X, Mgr Delamaire, Mgr Margerin and Mgr Berteaux that were greeted “with warm ovations” (“La Rédemption” 1909, 2). The first part of the spectacle itself consisted of colorful hand-painted slides depicting the Creation of the Earth, of the animals and finally of Adam, accompanied by Camille Saint-Saëns’ “Le Déluge,” played by the violinist Eugène Lecomte and his sister on the piano, “translating in a perfect concordance the sensations produced by the drawings” (3).¹³ The following slides showed Jerusalem, scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary and the Nativity, all of which were reproductions of paintings from different periods and different Schools. These, too, were combined with musical performances. The report mentioned an excerpt of “Gallia” by Charles Gounod, a work referring to Jerusalem, sung by a choir with a solo by Suzanne Bury, a local singing teacher, also the Annunciation duet from Jules Massenet’s “La Vierge” by, again, Bury and another singing teacher, Mademoiselle Caudron, as well as Gounod’s “Noël” performed by Mademoiselle Deffrennes.

The evening thus mobilized a number of local singers and musicians, while the choice of the music itself was apparently motivated by its thematic correspondence with the slides, or rather the paintings that were reproduced on them. This principle was followed also in the second and the third parts of the spectacle, dedicated to the life of Christ. The musical accompaniment included an excerpt from Hector Berlioz’s “L’Enfance du Christ,” “Chant de Pâques” by (probably¹⁴) Paul Rougnon, Massenet’s “Le dernier sommeil de la Vierge” and other religious compositions. The spectacle ended with the “triumphant” “Gloria Patri” by Georges Marietti and a “final series of superb projections, the last of which, representing Pius X, provoked a thundering applause to greet the venerated Pontifex and to confirm the audience’s satisfaction that had manifested itself already in bravos throughout the evening” (3).

The spectacle was thus in a sense “multimedial”, using projected images, instrumental music and lyrics, and it was multimodal, addressing both the eyes and the ears of the audience. At the same time, by projecting reproductions of (at the time probably well-known) paintings and choosing religious music by nineteenth-century composers, the organizers ascertained the respectability and heightened the cultural status of the event. Given the structure of the spectacle, from the Creation to (quite probably) the fall of mankind, and then from the life of the Virgin to the birth of the Redeemer, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, it was possible to quite easily find paintings that illustrated the major episodes of the story to be told, as well as the fitting musical accompaniment. The choice of

composers –

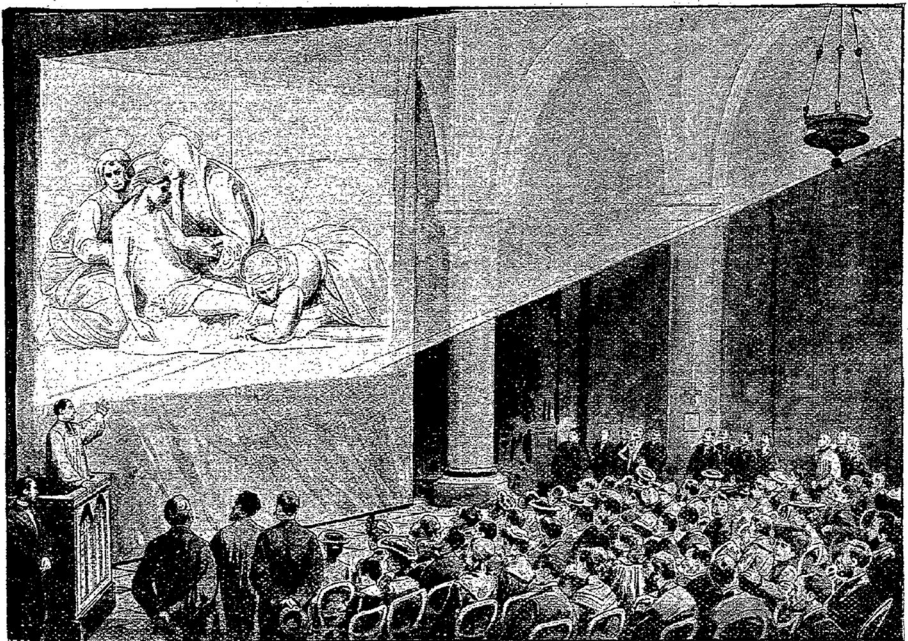
Berlioz, Gounod, Marietti, Massenet, Saint-Saëns – anchored the event firmly within French high culture. It is not possible to determine how long the spectacle lasted. It seems to have been made up of different sets of slides offered by the diocese's Œuvre des projections lumineuses, maybe even compiled from slides taken from a range of relevant sets. But it clearly offered a full evening's entertainment. Similar presentations using works of art depicting religious scenes were organized in other places as well (Figure 7).

Projected Sermons

The Catholic Church in France not only used the lantern to teach the catechism, to propagate its views on social issues, to provide education or information on a broad array of topics such as history, geography, the arts, science and technology, or to organize a “dignified spectacle” as the one in Roubaix. As long as projections in churches were still possible, some priests also used them during service. In another rare source documenting this practice, the Canon Chamayou from Toulouse described in *Le Rayon's* May issue of 1908 how he used the lantern when preaching (“Projections et prédications” 1908).

To begin with, Chamayou stated that his aim was to make his audience “work more or less as much as myself to connect

Le Tableau de la DÉPOSITION DE LA CROIX, de Fra Bartolomeo



76

A Sainte-Anne à Paris, M. l'abbé Poulin évoque les tableaux au fur et à mesure et les explique; des deux côtés, l'auditoire, nombreux, populaire et intelligent, suit avec respect et intérêt.

FIG 7

Illustration in *L'Ange des projections lumineuses* 1 (7), 1903 (Source: www.gallica.fr).

the ideas in my sermon" ("Projections et prédications" 1908, 68). Accordingly, he insisted on the importance of having a large screen. Generally, he used one measuring 25 m² or, in a very large church, even one of 50 m², and he compared the function of the screen to a blackboard in a school, which helps teachers "to make their lesson more concrete" (68). As for the slides, Chamayou distinguished three types:

1. Images "not different from those used by everyone else" (68), i. e. apparently those he could buy or rent from the Œuvres des projections lumineuses. However, if available, he asked for documents or other materials referring to the local context which he could photograph and transfer to a slide, such as a picture of the church or portraits of former priests, etc. of the parish where he was invited to celebrate a mass.
2. Slides with written text, and, to begin with, the title of the sermon. Furthermore, Chamayou projected definitions and quotations, sometimes with a portrait of the author. These slides, he explained, were like the script of his sermon and allowed the congregation to follow his words more easily and meditate on them together with him. Moreover, he expressed the hope that reading what was written on the slides while listening to the sermon helped the congregation better understand and retain its argument (69).
3. Slides with the lyrics of chants that were to be sung during the sermon. Chamayou tried to choose chants that were well-known and harmonized with the images. If he could not find an appropriate chant, he wrote one himself and had the congregation sing it to a tune they all were familiar with. Slides with chants, according to Chamayou, were "popular with the faithful" as they "confirmed through the chants what they had seen and meditated on" (69).

The example of Chamayou shows that projections could indeed be integrated into the religious practice itself, and his explanations on how and why he uses these different types of slides provide important insights into the way the medium could be adopted by the Catholics, even though this practice had to be discontinued a few years later. What is striking in this account, is his claim to use the lantern in order to enhance the congregation's intellectual engagement with the service and his sermon. The multimodality of his sermon – spoken word, projected image, written text, chant – was aimed at an interaction with those who attended the service that went beyond the ritual exchanges during mass. Those listening to the sermon could at the same time see projected images that were thematically linked to the spoken word, or follow the line of the sermon by reading the excerpts and quotations that appeared on the screen. Addressing his audience both through their ears and their eyes, Chamayou claimed that they were more attentive and capable to much better follow his train of thoughts. The lantern, in other words, became a valuable pedagogical instrument that allowed to illustrate, complement, and enrich the message that the sermon wanted to communicate. Chamayou's insistence on the size of the screen that he used points into the same direction. The projected image had to provide a central

focal point for the congregation's attention, while he himself had to be prepared to share the stage with the visual medium in order to enhance the effect of the sermon. Thus the dominant role of the spoken word was somewhat weakened. This fact may have been one of the points that provoked resistance against projections in churches from other members of the clergy.

Conclusion: Engaging with the Modern World

While, all in all, Chamayou may have been an exception among the French Catholic priests, his practice was presented as exemplary to the readers of *Le Rayon*. It is difficult to say, however, whether his example was followed by many others. Yet, the mere existence of journals such as *Le Fascinateur*, *L'Ange des projections lumineuses*, or *Le Rayon* and the *Œuvres des projections lumineuses* in most of the French¹⁵ dioceses, bears witness to the fact that there were indeed numerous men (and to some extent also women) of the Church, who embraced the new medium as an up-to-date instrument to communicate with the country's Catholic population, but also society in general.¹⁶ Sermons such as those organized by Chamayou might be compared to masses today using popular music. Adopting the lantern for teaching meant using a modern medium of visual education to instruct the population (as well as children in Catholic schools). Organizing an event such as "La Rédemption" allowed to address local cultural elites and offer an edifying leisure activity based on art works and music inspired by Christian faith. Apologetic or propagandistic illustrated lectures made it possible to engage with important social, political, or cultural issues from a Catholic point of view and take a stance in the public debates of the time.

The slide sets offered in the catalogue published in *Le Rayon* cover a broad range of topics, which demonstrates the many subjects that the Catholic lecturers addressed. Apart from subjects related to the Bible, the history of the Catholic Church and apologetics, including sets explaining the Church's position vis-à-vis social, cultural, and political issues (such as family, school, workers' organizations, slavery, evolution, the modern woman...), the catalogue contains several other sections: general history (mainly from a both Catholic and patriotic viewpoint), travels (France, Europe, Africa, Asia, America), art, sciences (and technology) as well as a general heading "Life in France" (military, agriculture, fishing, gymnastics and sports, mining). The lantern, in other words, tried to compete with the Ligue de l'enseignement's *Œuvres post-scolaires* in their struggle for the minds of young people prior to their military service, and offer them instruction within the Catholic sphere, lest they turn away from the Church (Figure 8).

More generally speaking, such illustrated lectures allowed to teach different groups of the population on many aspects of everyday life, on developments in the fields of science and technology, and to contribute to their general education. Many



FIG 8

Slide: "Unless you do eat the body of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you are not really living at all. (John 6:54)" and "Evil shall slay the wicked. (Psalms 33 [34]: 22)" (courtesy KADOC at KU Leuven; photo: Adeline Werry).

of the sets appear to have been ideologically neutral, the lectures may have interpreted them from a Catholic viewpoint whenever this was deemed appropriate: "Subjects that seem to not have any relationship with the [Catholic] dogma and morals, can always be turned to the benefit of religion and the well-being of the souls" (Périeré 1909, 539). So they could serve to promote the Church as an institution helping people to get an education that enabled them to participate more actively in contemporary society. Or as J. Périeré put it: "[...] the clergy wins the esteem of the people, who has to admit that the priests are not ignorant" (Périeré 1909, 539).

The French Catholic Church, thus, used the magic lantern for a broad range of purposes. A common denominator, one might say, was to use an up-to-date visual medium that allowed to connect the Church with the modern world. By means of the lantern, Catholic institutions and the clergy could engage with current cultural, social, and political issues and affirm the Church's place in modern society, and at the same time help the faithful through education and instruction to position themselves in it as Catholics and to counter the effects of secularization.



FIG 9

Slide: "Christ resurrected." (courtesy Collectie Toverlantaarnmuseum Scheveningen).

At the same time, there also was resistance to the efforts of the "apostles with a lantern." They had to deal with light very directly and literally, deciding whether to use safe, but rather weak petroleum lights or venture into the realm of oxygen lamps and handle complicated and potentially gas mixtures, while the beams of their lantern were also metaphorically meant to bring the light of faith and knowledge to their audiences (Figure 9). Their opponents, however, feared the new medium might desecrate the churches and invite improper behavior. When the light of the lantern was joined by the light of the film projector, this mixture was deemed too dangerous by some, and they succeeded in having projections banned from churches in 1912. But in the long run, the light of the lanterns and projectors did not fade.

Acknowledgements

The article was written within the research project "B-magic. The Magic Lantern and Its Cultural Impact as Visual Mass Medium in Belgium (1830-1940)". "B-magic" is an Excellence of Science project (EOS-contract 30802346, 2018-2023) supported by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS). The authors would like to thank KADOC at KU Leuven and the Toverlantaarnmuseum Scheveningen for their friendly support.

notes and references

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all translations are ours.

² In fact, the expression “magic lantern” was no longer in use at the time, in particular when referring to educational uses of the projected image. In the U.S. the preferred term was “stereopticon,” in Britain it was “optical lantern,” in Germany “Sciopticon,” in France “lanterne de projection.” For the terminology in the U.S. see Borton (2015). Nevertheless, the term “magic lantern” is frequently used today in scholarly works to refer to the medium of the projection lantern in general, and so we will use it as well occasionally.

³ From figures given in Perriault (1981, 106–108) one can infer that the rapid increase slowed down after 1904. Figures refer to seasons, which started in the Fall, when night fell earlier, and ended in Spring.

See Kessler and Lenk (2019) for distribution figures in dioceses in the north of France, which did indeed grow relatively rapidly, while the Musée pédagogique seemed to have reached its peak in 1908/09.

Season	1904/ 05	1905/ 06	1906/ 07	1907/ 08	1908/ 09	1909/ 10	1910/ 11	1911/ 12	1912/ 13
Slide sets distributed by Musée pédagogique	31,900	31,704	32,005	36,485	37,742	35,219	37,422	35,977	36,312

In French, the term “œuvres” can refer to all sorts of religious or public organizations providing aid and support, such as charities, educational initiatives, social support groups, etc. For the emergence of *Œuvres de projections lumineuses* in France and Belgium see also Kessler and Lenk (2019), for the developments in France in general see Saint-Martin (2004).

⁵ Thanks to Dulce da Rocha Gonçalves for sharing this source with us.

⁶ Maison de la Bonne Presse ceased distributing slides and equipment in 1908 and concentrated on the production of slide sets. See Kessler and Lenk (2019, 99). In the beginning, supply seems to have been a problem, because repeatedly subscribers to the services were asked to provide

photographs made by themselves to be reproduced and added to the œuvres’ catalogues.

⁷ We would like to thank Bart Moens for bringing this book to our attention.

⁸ A similar strategy of “nobilization” was adopted by those advocating the use of cinematography in the service of the Church.

⁹ In the 1920s and 1930s, in Flanders, those campaigning for the Catholic cause were even called “kruistochters” (crusaders).

¹⁰ A major difference between France and the U.S. is that the First Amendment to the United States Constitution stipulates that Congress cannot make any law that prevents the free exercise of religion, and thus there was no antagonism between the State and the various religious communities in the U.S. The First Amendment, in other words, made impossible the kind of political initiatives that the French Catholic Church had to face. While in France legislation had become clearly anti-catholic, in

Belgium the Catholics still held political power, but were engaged in a fierce battle with their liberal opponents. See Kessler and Lenk (2019).

¹¹ See also the distribution catalogue for 1911 that was published in *Le Rayon*, which contains many more examples of such patriotic sets (“Catalogue” 1910).

¹² Whether the lecture texts published by *Le Rayon* and other journals were actually presented verbatim by the lecturers, is impossible to say. One can presume that experienced lecturers rather took them as a starting point and adapted them for their audiences and the contexts wherein they spoke.

¹³ In the report the slides were said to have been painted by the “master” Monsieur Vignola. Vignola is

mentioned in the catalogue as the artist whose drawings constitute the slide set "La Pastorale de Noël" ("Catalogue" 1910, 82).

¹⁴ The catalogue lists several sets to illustrate music. Some of the musical works, among which "Chant de Pâques" by Rougnon, were performed during the event. Also at least two other pieces that are mentioned in the report on the spectacle appear in this list: "Duo de l'Annonciation" and "Non credo." It can be assumed that these sets were part of those projected that evening ("Catalogue" 1910, 98).

¹⁵ One of the aims of the B-magic project is to gain more insights into the activities in Belgian dioceses.

¹⁶ One should not forget in this context that priests engaging in lantern projections had to acquire knowledge about projection technology, in particular lenses and the different lighting systems: from alcohol burners and oil light to oxy-hydrogen and electric light. Choices between these different systems depended on local conditions and equipment. Once electricity had become an easily available source of energy in France by 1920, projectionists adopted this relatively safe and unproblematic illuminant. Up until then, alcohol, oil, ether, or oxy-hydrogen lighting had been the rule, which demanded specific know-how.

"Améliorations Projetées." 1908. *Le Rayon* 3 (3): 34.

Borton, Terry. 2015. "The Professional Life of "Magic Lantern" Illustrated Lecturers." *The Magic Lantern Gazette: A Journal of Research* 27 (1): 3–27.

"Catalogue (1911) des Séries de Vues de Projection." 1910. *Le Rayon* 5 (6-7-8): 81–112.

"Le Cinéma à l'Église." 1912, May 29. *La Gazette de Charleroi*.

Coissac, G.-Michel. n.d. [1906] *La Théorie et la Pratique des Projections*. Paris: Maison de la Bonne Presse.

"Conférences-Catéchismes. Quatrième Conférence. Les Commandements de Dieu." 1906. *Le Rayon* 1 (10): 142–145.

"Le Drapeau Français. Sa Signification et son Histoire." 1902. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (1): 9–10.

"L'Enseignement par l'Image." 1906. *Le Rayon* 1 (10): 146–147.

G. A. 1902. "Le Rapport Édouard Petit." *L'Ange des projections lumineuses* 1 (2): 23–25.

IJzermans, H. 1909. "Een Nuttig Winteravondvermaak voor Patronaten." *Het Centrum* 7734. *Derde Blad*: 1.

Kessler, Frank, and Sabine Lenk. 2019. "Fighting the Enemy with the Lantern: How French and Belgian Catholic Priests Lectured against Their Common Laic Enemies before 1914." *Early Popular Visual Culture* 17 (1): 89–111. doi: 10.1080/17460654.2019.1641971

"La Lanterne Magique et les Appareils de Projection." 1903. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (9): 134–140.

Le Bail, Gabriel. 1907. *Peut-on Employer des Projections Lumineuses dans les Retraites*. Enghien (Belgique): Bibliothèque des Exercices.

Linon. 1909, February 28. "L'apostolat Catholique dans les Quartiers Populaires de Paris." *Le XXe Siècle* 15 (59): 6.

"La Lutte." 1903. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (5): 65–68.

"Notre raison d'être: Esquisse d'un Programme." 1902. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (1): 1–3.

"La Patrie." 1902. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (2): 26–27.

"Le Patron des Projectionnistes." 1908. *Le Rayon* 3 (3): 36.

Périé, J. 11 September 1909. "L'Apostolat par les Projections (suite et fin)." *La Semaine Religieuse de l'Archidiocèse d'Albi* 37: 537–542.

Perriault, Jacques. 1981. *Mémoires de l'Ombre et du Son. Une Archéologie de l'Audio-Visuel*. Paris: Flammarion.

Petit, Edouard. 1911. "Post-Scolaires (œuvres)." In *Nouveau Dictionnaire de Pédagogie et d'Instruction Primaire*, edited by Ferdinand Buisson. Paris: Hachette. <http://www.inrp.fr/edition-electronique/lodel/dictionnaire-ferdinand-buisson/document.php?id=3424>.

"Petite Controverse." 1903. *L'Ange des Projections Lumineuses* 1 (9): 132–133.

Pierre, M. R. 1910. "Les Œuvres Catholiques de Projection." *Le Rayon* 5 (3): 38–39.

- "Les Prêtres et le Cinématographe." 1909. *Ciné-Journal* 56 (9).
- "Projections et Prédications." 1908. *Le Rayon* 3 (5): 68–69.
- "La 'Rédemption'" 1909. *Le Rayon* 4 (1): 2–4.
- "Renseignement." 1910. *Le Rayon* 5 (3): 46.
- Saint-Martin, Isabelle. 2004. "'Sermons Lumineux' et Projections dans les Églises, 1884-1912." *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 78 (3): 381–400.
- Schaefer, Sarah C. 2017. "Illuminating the Divine: The Magic Lantern and Religious Pedagogy in the USA, ca. 1870–1920." *Material Religion* 13 (3): 275–300. doi:10.1080/17432200.2017.1308176
- "Une Séance de Projections au Vatican." 1909. *Le Rayon* 4 (4): 56.
- Véronneau, Pierre. 2007. "Le Fascinateur et la Bonne Presse: des Médias Catholiques pour Publics Francophones." 1895 40: 25–40. doi:10.4000/1895.3282
- Von Witzleben, Elisabeth. n. d. *Faszination durch Farbe – Licht – Glas. Europäische Glasmalerei*. Augsburg: Verlag Josef Hanneschläger.